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ILLUSIONS.

BY

H. MUSGRAVE,

AUTHOR OF "ASTRÆA," "RIVERSIDE SKETCHES," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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BOOK THE SECOND

(*Continued*).

ILLUSIONS.

CHAPTER VI.

FEMININE MANŒUVRES.

Alps on Alps appeared to rise in Miss McCracken's sight. She trembled, confronting the host of difficulties which greeted her on Sunday morning. On Saturday, the day following her campaign in the hunting field, it rained heavily, so that she had ample opportunity to rest and consider thankfully her success with the Ringroses. However, towards evening, being worn out with *ennui*, she had no longer the spirit to kill care, and retired

early to rest, with grave doubts as to what Sunday's post might bring forth. Her presentiments of calamity were amply fulfilled. The post-bag was brought up to her room, at her desire, as soon as it arrived.

"Draw the blinds up, and let papa know I shall not be down to breakfast, Curtis."

The maid departed, leaving her young lady contemplating the little pile of envelopes on her bed. A tremor passed over Rachel as she took up the first note.

The colonel from the depôt accepted Miss McCracken's invitation for himself and officers with great pleasure. So did Mr. Nichol, with his friend; but Miss Jessie, being subject to bronchitis, did not go out to evening parties. Rachel sighed, for, in spite of her Glasgow accent and partiality for bright colours, young Jessie was a "sonsie lassie," as her father termed

it. And fair looks, with or without discretion, were at a premium. Two of the Miss Bragges regretted they would be absent at that date, but Miss Rose would be charmed to come. Of course there was no reply yet from the Proteus family. They were probably waiting, reflected Rachel, to hear if any other county folks were going. She did not yet know that the baronet was a pivot which would certainly bring them. Half a dozen fledglings from Oldford—active young men who would expect to dance, a couple of curates, a lawyer's son, and a rudimentary professor home for his holidays—accepted as a matter of course. Men, nothing but men! Rachel sighed and sighed. Mr. Brown's sister-in-law had most unfortunately broken her leg two days previously, but Mr. Brown himself would be delighted to join Miss McCracken's party. Might he be allowed to bring an old college friend? Rachel's consternation

was extreme. In vain she paced to and fro with hands locked together, racking her brain to think of any attractive friends far or near. The Misses Wilson, shortly to be her guests, were the prevailing type amongst all her former acquaintance.

Cousins she had without number. Shoals of them lived in villas at Putney and Clapham. They were girls who frizzed their hair down to their eyebrows, who giggled immoderately on the smallest provocation, and were fulsome in their praise of their rich relatives. Certainly Matilda, or Isabella, or Eugenie McCracken were not to be thought of. They would be sure to over-eat themselves, and the buttons down the backs of their gowns would fly off daily beneath the pressure of high-feeding and too frequent champagne, not leaving the compression of their scarlet stays to the imagination of the public.

The Putney Miss McCrackens, being

cheerfully minded maidens, always wore red stays and other gaily coloured undergarments where cousin Rachel's fastidious eye could not call them to account for their vulgarity. Being also fat and dumpy, as a matter of course their frocks were fastened behind.

"It gives such elegance to the figure, you know, Matilda. Besides, every one must think you keep a maid if you button or lace up the back," said Eugenie, a great authority on gentility.

These young ladies aped the manners of their wealthy young relative with great constancy, but Rachel was cruelly indifferent to all their endeavours to climb the social ladder, whose lowest steps she had already past.

Miss McCracken, now pondering over the difficulties surrounding her ball, regretted that she had never been to a boarding-school. Perhaps by reason of

this accident she had escaped a few vulgarities of taste which condemned the Putney young ladies.

Nevertheless, she lamented bitterly the limited circle of her female acquaintances. Intimates she had none.

Her dance would not only be flat, but positively unprofitable, if she could not see her way to securing an element of youth, good looks, and gaiety.

She knew by report that the Ringrose festivities were the dullest of the dull, but no one called them failures. Failure presupposes some sort of effort. Now there was no necessity for effort at the Abbey, and it was self-evident that such entertainments as were given there were no strain to Mrs. Ringrose's mind.

Neither "feast of reason nor flow of soul" testified to any endeavour on the part of the hostess. No need to court popularity, or sufferance demanded that the great lady

should be amusing or lavish when she opened her doors to lesser lights.

The effect of a struggle is generally to exhilarate the onlookers—if only to criticism. Rachel did not, however, intend that her exertions should only be rewarded by satirical strictures.

Her attempt to amuse the county ought to force people's attention towards her, and from that attentive regard might come toleration, and from toleration favour.

Miss McCracken did not probably know the epigram—

> "Treason does never prosper; what's the reason
> That if it prosper, none do call it treason?"—

but mentally she subscribed faithfully to David's opinion: "Do well for thyself, and all men shall praise thee," which comes much to the same thing.

She was aware that if she gave a successful entertainment no one would say that the biscuit-maker's daughter had

taken too much upon herself. It is the m[illegible]ige of effort which alone makes [illegible]ed culpable in the world's sight. Ambition is not ambition, but [illegible]ity, if it is lucky enough to hit its mark and not go turning unwarranted somersaults on the other side, like Macbeth's crime, for all ages attainted.

Fortitude, or strength of mind, is characterized as the patient endurance of ills. I am of opinion that Rachel was very strong-minded, though not in any way disposed to resignation or a stoical staring in the face of any disappointments. In her case the quality of fortitude declared itself, not in rest, but in action. She wrinkled her pretty brows grievously over the many contradictions which now beset her path, but yet considered at once how they might be overcome.

Miss Pilkington would, of course, supply a lively element, but Rachel desired that

men might laugh *with* her guests, and not *at* them. Besides, what availed such a meagre leaven of gaiety and forgetfulness when the cry concerning *men* echoed still, "They come! they come!" There yet remained Olivia's young niece to be proven, though the aunt had not given a favourable account of her fascinations.

"Letitia is quite a schoolgirl, Miss McCracken—just emancipated from pinafores and bread-and-butter. She is a sad romp, being one of seven, and quite deficient in style and manner."

Miss Pilkington always laid much stress upon style and address, considering her own qualifications that way approaching perfection.

"Miss Pilkington has a style of her own," Apollo Longstaffe had repeated frequently, never giving a hint of any satirical meaning.

This dictum was accepted by all in the

vicinity. If such a very smart young officer as Apollo Longstaffe conceded attractions, the neighbours were bound to follow.

On Sunday morning, before seeking her usual distraction at church, Rachel's sky, you perceive, was overcast with very black clouds. It must be remembered that the previous day had been wet, and that Lady Wrexham's call had in consequence been frustrated. On that morrow whereof she had spoken decisively to her husband, the rain came down heavily from an early hour. To drive five miles in an open vehicle was out of the question for the delicate little lord, and the visit to the McCrackens would be robbed of its chief zest if Ellesmore's chatter did not the same day enlighten Mrs. Ringrose of her daughter's independent action. The boy was the innocent instrument in Laura's hands of her mother's spiritual chastisement and abasement, being brought

up contrary to any established law of training for young aristocracy. Laura would not forego the immeasurable satisfaction of letting the old lady know that her erewhile docile daughter had broken away in a new direction from her dominion. However, in plain English the rebel was a coward when placed face to face with the tyrant. She would not tell her mother outright that interference at Ellesmore Lodge was obnoxious, but she intended, by a series of flagrant offences, to deal side blows which would make a formidable breach in the authority of this county ruler. The deferring of Lady Wrexham's call, of which honour in store for her Rachel was ignorant, had its effect upon our young heroine's tactics. She might not have ventured to seek recruits in what she considered a grade beneath her own, had the knowledge of forthcoming aristocratic patronage been revealed to her.

Prescience might thus have been a hindrance in her path to success, and much of this story would have remained untold. As it happened, Rachel gained the glory of discovering beauty and merit.

At church the clouds began to part. The aspect of certain strangers who appeared on the scene established new hopes. Miss Pilkington's niece, becomingly attired, was sheltered behind the harmonium without being screened by it. She was no rude hoyden, tittering at incidental crashes or false notes, but a decorous dainty piece of clay, pink and white as Dresden china, with a rosebud mouth and miniature hands. There was nothing whatever of the raw schoolgirl about her to authenticate Miss Pilkington's description, unless her manners and speech were to be condemned. Now and again she glanced demurely over her music at a broad-shouldered young man whose fair hair was

more closely shorn than usage demands. Apollo abhorred curls, and how was he to get rid of that crisp turn of his locks if they exceeded half an inch? This young giant sat restless between his mother and Philomela, who were both less devout than usual. His appearance was accounted for as Miss McCracken recalled her parent's words concerning the doctor's son with the recommendation to employ him in the service of the Wilson girls. In spite of the abundance of the masculine element, she promptly made up her mind that this comely young soldier would be serviceable on the thirty-first. How good to look at he was! But oh, how unquiet! He turned round and deliberately surveyed the congregation to the rear of him; he glanced to the side of him, at the roof, at the red roses crowning Olivia's bonnet,—anywhere but at his book or at Mr. Pilkington. He took out his watch repeatedly; he sat

down when he ought to have stood up; he said none of the responses, found none of his places, and never knelt. Apollo had new trousers on this morning, which accounted for the last omission. Still, admitting that as a plea, he behaved otherwise like a naughty boy. As Rachel cast one of her swift side-glances, before dropping her eyes for the Litany, she caught the audacious stare of the bold blue eyes levelled at herself. Philomela was disturbed by the restlessness of her neighbour, in spite of every effort to contain herself. Why could he not keep still? Her eyes were raised frequently to Apollo's face in expressive inquiry. Then she fell to admiring the silky gloss of his blonde moustache, which had developed so gloriously in a year's absence.

Miss McCracken thought the dumb girl attractive this morning, and ascribed her improved looks to a big black velvet hat,

instead of to the transforming influence of her loving worship. But it was a strange lady—a young woman seemed the fitter term to apply to the owner of a grave, beautiful face—who chiefly exercised Rachel's speculations. No supposition fairly accounted for the presence of this stranger, or for her tranquil air of being at home in this church. She came in late, entering a seat which was always empty, without any hesitation or looking about for the permission of a local officer. Her step was swift, but easy, without the noisy patter of high heels, and she held her head well up, not betraying any shamefacedness at her tardy arrival. This tall, wide-eyed young person, dressing with such amazing simplicity in a day of flounces and furbelows, having, in spite of this plainness, a remarkably distinguished appearance, was no milliner's assistant or farmer's daughter home for the holidays. Such as

those would have come forth arrayed in Sunday best, with feathers, frills, and flowers to certify their prosperous circumstances. Moreover, this girl's quiet manners and self-possessed carriage stamped her gently bred. She did not seem to consider that her appearance might excite interest or remark; and to Rachel it appeared that it did not. Bringing out a key from her pocket, she unlocked a book box at once, giving no heed to the congregation. After she had cast off a long fur-lined cloak she sat quite still. Her glance betrayed no observant interest, never once wandering towards the Hall pew, though Rachel's eyes strayed again and again towards her, resting each time in a longer scrutiny.

Mr. McCracken rattled his money offensively, it being collection Sunday, fluttered the leaves of a Bible impatiently during a long lesson, and finally snored an accom-

paniment to the dismal intonation of Mr. Pilkington's voice in the Litany, without moving the girl's imperturbable demeanour. Either she was not naturally irritable, or else she had schooled herself to endure the minor discords of humanity's making; for a discord to any one with devout feelings those audible interruptions ought to have been.

The girl's glance was seldom cast down. She evidently was not self-engrossed, but absolutely and entirely given up to the service. If any fault could be found with her eyes, they were too widely open. They were steadfast, large, and beautiful, having a look of expectancy or inquiry. They were eyes that rarely seemed quite satisfied.

"I never see far enough or look high enough, I think," Medea had exclaimed once in her earlier girlhood, discouraged by some trivial failure.

Surely never did human orbs shine with

a soul more clearly expressed. At one moment the translucent grey was warm and melting with feeling, and the next stern and cold, as reason combated some fallacious statement. To Rachel, covertly watching her as her looks were bent on Mr. Pilkington's face, or were raised to the east window, it appeared that every passing thought was mirrored in those self-forgetful eyes. Long before the sermon was over, as wave after wave of emotion or disapproval came up to their surface, Rachel decided that for herself she would rather dispense with such transparencies. Even taking their singular luminous attractiveness into consideration, it would be highly inconvenient to reveal one's mind so clearly. The gain would not be equal to the loss. For Rachel was aware of a soul not unspotted with wicked or worldly desires, and had the grace to wish to cloak her unrighteousness. I cannot deny that she felt

a thrill of thankfulness for drooping eyelids and a mouth not over-sensitive. If she did hatch ambitious schemes her exterior would not betray her. For who could suspect a plaintive, child-like voice and a small, pensive face of concealing determined intent or a capable mind? No enemy would accuse her of diplomacy while she maintained the outward semblance of simplicity and sweetness. A sort of fascination compelled Rachel's eyes towards Medea Longstaffe. The tall figure, always with the head rather thrown back, stood and knelt and sat down with such a quiet dignity, while the straight, untrimmed folds of her gown draped about her in a way that antedated an æsthetic day, and was a novelty to Rachel, who knew nothing of art. Who could she be? For Medea sat beneath the mural monument apart from the rest of her family. Mrs. Morgan had, upon her marriage, migrated, without

regret, to the doctor's pew, which was conveniently screened by a pillar from the memorial of Nicholas. But Medea had retained her former seat on her few short visits to Lakenham.

It is no easy task to bring this girl before you. I cannot even have the satisfaction of recommending her as a noble heroine. She achieves nothing wonderful or virtuous in these pages.

In the correct sense of the word, Medea was not a beauty. She paled before other women with brilliant colouring, and a classical profile placed beside her indicated the faults of too wide a mouth, too broad a brow. In the street you could not, however, pass her by without notice, because of her erect carriage and a certain calm way of progress, not perhaps admired of those who are accustomed to the jigging and the ambling of a self-conscious womankind. In spite of faults of feature and

imperfect colouring, Medea was a striking woman, and attracted attention if not admiration. Medea spoke quickly, but, unlike most quick speakers, without any vibration of sharpness. You might well forget that her mouth was too wide when her eager words came forth in the full warm tones of impulse. Apollo and Flossie were wont to sit in judgment upon her for her transparency and enthusiasms. These worldly minded young sages condemned her frankness and insisted on more self-control.

"You should learn to take and give things with one hand, Medea," had counselled Madame Freudenthal, perceiving her pupil's ardent nature.

"That I never shall learn to do," had answered Medie, profoundly sighing.

Yet this learned young lady, versed in sciences and dead languages, took all rebuke meekly and humbly, submitting to being snubbed by Flora and Apollo in all matters

of social observance and decorous behaviour. But the blame or disdain of those she loved hurt her keenly. She was alive to a look of reproof, sensitive to a word of derision. This was a finely strung nature, not made for the light, quick tunes and slipshod marches to which humanity limps along to the nearest goal. She could not walk with the halt, the lame, and the blind, crawling along to uncertain measures, because her ear was true and recognized discord and faulty rhythm, because her eye was clear and saw some nobler crown of glory in the skies.

She had returned home now after a long sojourn abroad, unwillingly moved to this step by the fretful solicitations of her mother. It had ever been a sad grievance against Medea that she loved independence.

A too easy yielding in many things on the doctor's part had developed certain

latent, shrewish qualities in Charlotte's disposition. This comfortable-looking matron, having all her own way in her home, established a perpetual complaint against the burdens of her life and its too many domestic worries. She had two capable women-servants as well as Philomela to shield her from household cares. The deaf-and-dumb girl was a host in herself, but apparently her services were not sufficient. There is no doubt Mrs. Morgan wanted some one to stick pins into. Life went on oiled springs generally, and it was becoming monotonous. Medea must therefore come home, with or against her will. And she did come.

"Who is the tall girl in the black dress, Miss Pilkington?" quoth Rachel in a whisper, as she pushed her flounces down the aisle after Olivia.

"Why, it's Medea Longstaffe, of course. No, you couldn't guess—there's no family resemblance whatever. She takes after

her papa, no doubt. Peculiar style, isn't she? She'll never shake off that foreign air, though I hear she has come back from Germany for good and all. We really are to believe there is an end of her accomplishments. And she twenty-five." Miss Pilkington sniffed venomously, acknowledging the courtesies of humble parishioners, with a cold movement of her crown of roses. They were now standing in the porch, and Phil, hanging on Medea's arm, moved before them down the path. "Her taste in dress is most singular—quite indecent, in fact. I never did approve of that loose style. I like to see a figure well braced up. And her manners! Dear, dear, they really are like a child's! It must be quite embarrassing to Edward to be stared at in that bold way."

"Bold" was about the last adjective applicable to Medea's glance, full indeed, but utterly unconscious of self. Rachel

for once raised her eyebrows in genuine surprise.

"Do you really mean that she is the dumb girl's sister, and that the good-looking boy in Dr. Morgan's pew is her brother? They are quite a remarkable family."

Olivia, who in days gone by had hardly suffered Apollo's juvenile criticisms, now courted his attention. Her dignity had not increased at a ratio converse with wrinkles.

"Yes; that dear boy—now, isn't he quite a charming young man, Miss McCracken?—is Medie's only brother. I assure you they are not the least alike in character or tastes. He, of course, disapproves of her eccentric ways. It is delightful to see him in Lakenham once more, and quite with a military air. As I say, you can always tell a soldier by the curl of his moustache. May I, Miss

McCracken, beg an invitation for him to your dance?"

At county balls, Miss Pilkington's fate was usually to find herself stranded on benches with the partnerless. Apollo would certainly invite her to dance with him if she obtained a card for him on this occasion.

"I should be delighted, Miss Pilkington, only I have already so many men. Besides, Mrs. Morgan has never called on me."

The fact of Madame Ringrose not having called upon her had been no obstacle in the way of inviting her sons.

By this time Olivia's niece, rosy and dimpling, had put away the music and tripped down the church. She stood in the porch up to her aunt's elbow, with an air of prunes and prism about her, well assumed if not natural. The corners of her button-hole mouth were tucked in, her small hands clasped a minute Prayer-book, and her eyelashes were cast down.

"Letty, this is Miss McCracken," said Olivia sternly.

The reputed madcap made a decorous little bow, still studying her small feet as if with unconquerable shyness.

"You are coming to my dance, I hope, next week? By-the-by, Miss Pilkington, I have had no answer from you," said Rachel, surveying the demure little maid with the air and feelings of a china valuer.

Miss Letitia now ventured to raise her eyes, glancing doubtfully at the roses above Olivia's coronet.

"You will get it to-morrow. Edward never allows the letters to leave our house on Saturday evening, as they entail worldly considerations on Sunday, he thinks. I have given your invitation to Letty due consideration, and, as you have so pressed the matter, I feel I must yield. She really ought to be in the school-room, and I only trust that her foolish little

head may not be turned by any attentions. Men are so inconsiderate in their flatteries, and girls of her age are so apt to believe them."

The rosebud mouth was no longer drawn in so tightly, and another suspicious dimple came out. A dainty little heel ground a hole into a grassy grave. Rachel was too discreet to smile at the duenna glance cast towards Letty. Lifting up her muff with a gesture of thanks, she said in a more plaintive voice than before—

"That is really very good of you, Miss Pilkington. I am sure you will both be a great addition. I could not spare either of you. Country districts seem so short of dancing ladies. I shall be in despair if I can't conjure up a few. Will you help me?"

Rachel's eyes were apparently looking absently down the road. Olivia intercepted their glance, fixed on the retreat-

ing figures of the Longstaffes. Rachel had intended she should, having made up her mind that Medea should be her guest.

"I shall be most happy to assist you, dear Miss McCracken. There's the Longstaffe girls, who I'm sure would stand on no ceremony; they are not that kind of people. Mrs. Morgan is a very unpretentious little woman; quite homely, in fact, in spite of her superior connections."

Miss Pilkington was still bent on introducing her young soldier to the festive gathering. She would be a proud woman on the auspicious evening with such a partner in tow. Now, if Miss McCracken invited Medea, she could not set the young man's claims to notice aside.

"Superior connections?" repeated Rachel, with some interest.

"Oh yes; she was a Godbold before her first marriage, though her family have dropped her of late years. I assure you

I can deliver a card to Medea without giving offence. She is accustomed to society, and no doubt will welcome any little dissipation. It is easy to see she quite appreciates the little attentions of gentlemen. Indeed, I would go so far as to say she lays herself out to please them. I really can't understand what they see to admire in her. Now, Edward is quite absurd in his admiration, and both he and Letty insist that she is handsome. Handsome, indeed, with such a mouth and pale complexion!"

The hoyden Letty had evidently been taken severely to task for expressing such an opinion. She shot an indignant glance across the churchyard, prodding holes yet more fiercely into Simon Sharpe's grave.

"Not handsome exactly," said Rachel, in conciliatory tones, thinking truly that no qualifying adjective would exactly fit Miss Longstaffe.

"I think it would be best, Miss Pilkington, if I could meet your friends at your house before sending my invitation. I shall be charmed to make the acquaintance of such an interesting family. But I will not detain you any longer now. I see papa is waiting for me. Good-bye."

CHAPTER VII.

DELILAH.

A LITTLE note came to Rachel on Monday morning, asking her to take tea at the rectory in the afternoon. Nothing was said about the Longstaffes, yet Miss McCracken perfectly well understood that they would be there to meet her. Letty did not turn traitor to this little manœuvre till long afterwards, when it became apparent that Apollo was estimating the captivating Rachel's charms above their worth.

Certainly it was in all ignorance of being the victims of any plottings that Medea and her brother responded to Miss Pilking-

ton's request that they would spend the afternoon with her. There was nothing really extraordinary in the event of a dashing little phaeton driving under the window just on the stroke of four, when tea was brought in. Medea, sweet soul, was never observant of such trifles, or she might have suspected treachery under the muffins and seed-cake; for Miss Pilkington on ordinary occasions did not go beyond bread-and-butter or biscuits to the Longstaffes. The door-bell rang with authority and briskness. In a few seconds a ravishing get-up of black velvet and grey furs was ushered in. Miss McCracken thoroughly understood the art of framing herself. Her dress was something that never failed to set off her small person to advantage. It added greatly to her attractions that she had the skill to diminish the blemishes of her complexion and colouring, as well as to conceal any faults of form. No one called her insipid,

because her attire was full of the life and expression her person lacked. She made the most of herself, and undiscerning folks said she was pretty solely because she accurately gauged her own imperfections.

Her feet were large, but she was always carefully shod, and did not wear embroidered stockings or showy buckles to invite attention to them; her golden hair, a shade too dull in the light, was irreproachably dressed—the neat twist, not her own, which was insinuated into the coils, a trifle brighter than the rest. Her hands, naturally red, owed much improvement to almond paste and constant care. She did not gesticulate with these imperfect members, wore no turquoise rings, and, if gloves were not admissible, ruffles of real lace hid her wrists.

Her clothes, made of the best materials and of the newest cut, never advertised wealth or ostentation. With every detail

studied, every trifle of fold and shape a matter of care, her face and chatter continued artless, her movements and manner apparently spontaneous and natural.

Rachel entered Miss Pilkington's drawing-room with a little breathless exclamation of pleasure, both hands extended. Olivia was arrayed in Dolly Varden attire, a bright skirt with a fancy tunic, and the affectation of a muslin apron, with smart bows attached. A tufted cap above her aquiline nose gave her the air of a large tropical cockatoo.

"How cosy you all look! The rooms at the Hall never get warm like this. Pray nobody move; I will sit anywhere —here."

She dropped into a low chair with apparently the most unconsidered movement, though she had in her mind seized this situation the moment the door opened. This intelligent creature never lost her

wits for a moment. Miss McCracken's involuntary action disconcerted poor Letty, who had been enjoying mightily Apollo's undivided attention, the while Aunt Olivia cross-questioned Medea. The little maid's cheeks wore a deeper pink than Dresden china now, and her tiny feet were crossed and stretched out to admiration on the hearthrug. An angry flash of her eyes escaped her as she was forced to draw them in and edge her chair back to admit Miss McCracken to the circle. Poor Letty had very little fun in her life, and Apollo was such an old playfellow. Of course, she only liked talking to him about those visits to Lakenham long ago.

Medea sat enthroned on the sofa on the other side of the hearthrug, so that Rachel now faced her. Miss Pilkington, engaged with her teapot, had her back to them all. Her young niece knew well the devices resorted to to save a spoonful from the caddy.

Of course the visitor from the Hall would have tea positive served to her, with cream in it; the Longstaffes would receive an infusion comparative; and as for Letty herself, her cup would be superlatively weak. From her vantage ground Rachel commanded the room, and was quite equal to taking in Olivia's manipulations with the hot-water jug, the while she lent an attentive ear to her neighbour's speech.

When, with a decidedly pettish movement, Miss Letitia backed her chair and uncrossed her feet, turning a bit of her shoulder towards Rachel, Apollo was quite ready to transfer his remarks to the newcomer, so attractive and softly amiable. Without waiting for any formal introduction, Rachel smiled sweetly towards the young man, graciously intimating that it was a cold day and there might be skating shortly; she hoped there would be. Did he skate? Apollo tucked his legs well

under his chair and prepared himself to be more than usually agreeable. It did not in the least matter if Letty Pilkington, whom he had known in short frock and frilled drawers, had a view of his muddy boots and turned-up trousers — a shabby pair, too; but to this elegant young stranger with the lovely troubled eyebrows, he would prefer to present an unblemished appearance.

"It is quite charming of you, Miss McCracken, to come and see me again without standing on ceremony. It is so delightful to have a neighbour at the Hall," quoth Olivia afar off, dropping cream in homœopathic doses into the cups. "By-the-by, you and Miss Longstaffe have not met before. Let me introduce you. Apollo, you bad boy, stand up and be presented to Miss McCracken."

Miss Pilkington advanced shaking her forefinger towards the young soldier with

the smiling assurance of a siren. She was very confident in the strength of her costume. It was a wonder the poor boy did not blush, I own. But he was a graceless youth. He did say to himself, "Confound the old girl!"

A sad sweep of Rachel's head towards Medea, with a little double nod more friendly and less dejected to Apollo, signified Miss McCracken's good-will. Then the rector came creeping in. He stood awhile hovering in the rear of Olivia's tea-table, addressing inaudible remarks to Medea. When Miss Pilkington signified to him, by a suggestive but stern "Edward," that he was to hand the perfected cups to the ladies, he looked hopelessly towards Apollo, the recognized squire of dames. However, this one's customary gallantry had forsaken him. Being too painfully conscious of those boots defiled, he turned a blind eye to signs, and dashed vigor-

ously into conversation. Having gone off at a break-neck speed, he continued to look away from what was required of him. Smiles broke over Rachel's face as he related stories of barrack life, and kept up a rattling fire of nonsense. Medea's attention was drawn towards the pair by rippling peals of laughter. Apollo was not so entertaining in the bosom of his family. Catching sight of Letty's downcast face, she wondered what was amiss. There was a jarring note somewhere. But girls and their manœuvres were strange to Medea. She had never lived much with young people. Indeed, had you told her that these two pleasing young creatures were making eyes and mouths at Apollo, she would have failed to understand the magnet nature of a young man under conditions of rivalry.

Physical sciences, the qualities attached to the loadstone, the polarization of light,

and such-like facts, were packed in her orderly brain, but animal magnetism of this kind she had never seen demonstrated. Oh, my well beloved Medea, would not a cynic have explained to you that, though the element of natural light may be made incapable of reflection or transmission in certain directions, that it is otherwise with the intractable element of a young man's favour, the light of his soft looks, which can never be conformed surely or scientifically to any poles of attraction?

Medea had seen Apollo reflect and transmit his attentions with constant irregularity on many occasions. Nevertheless, she did not reason logically from these premises upon the inconsistency of human nature. Neither had it been any part of her education to realize that the proper study of woman is mankind.

The corners of our disappointed Letty's rosebud mouth went down, down, expressing

the zero of discontent as she intercepted Apollo's glances and perceived the efforts he made to be agreeable. He had appeared quite satisfied to sit beside her, recalling old days and doings, till this enticing young person had put herself in the way.

Mr. Pilkington, having drunk of the beverage presented to him, remarked audibly—

"Olivia, I do wish the next time you see Mr. Cloves that you would speak about the inferior quality of his tea. It really is very bad. I had a cup at Mrs. Giles's cottage the other afternoon which was quite a treat. And yet I hear you pay three shillings a pound."

This honest man was distressed to feel that the rest of the company had drunk of the same weak compound.

"Ah, but you forget, Uncle Edward, that you and I have to share the husband's tea between us," said Letty, avoiding her

aunt's eye. She was suffering, poor child, from a burning jealousy, which, being a most irrational passion, always kicks at the nearest object.

"Here are your biscuits, Edward," interposed Olivia, promptly thrusting a canister towards him just as he extended a hand towards the muffin-dish, ready this once to yield to seductions of the flesh. Besides, those very hard biscuits were becoming a direct insult to his middle-aged teeth. Detected in yielding to a rare temptation, he was fain to select the hardest and driest, munching away steadily with due care.

"I hear you are not leaving us again just yet, Miss Longstaffe. I hope that I may count on your services in parish work," the clergyman remarked in a low voice, with a deprecating glance towards Olivia's back, which fully expressed the temerity of his speech.

As I have said before, there was no trace of sharpness in Medea's voice, but it had yet a singularly clear resonance in its tones. This distinct manner of speech often brought her into trouble with her family. Though her voice was full, and her manner of talking rapid, she never required to repeat any remark. Her voice seemed in some indescribable way to express largely the quality of truth, or something of the fearlessness inalienable from a truthful nature. For who would be a liar of choice? It is always courage that is wanted to be true.

The whole room knew what Mr. Pilkington's remark had been when Medie answered with her clear intonation.

"No," she said decidedly, then halted a moment. "At least, I shall not go away for some time. My mother thinks I ought to be useful at home." Here a faint colour rose to her face. "Not that I think I

shall be, for I am stupid at sewing and housekeeping. Phil, you know, is so clever, that she puts me to shame in simple domestic matters. But perhaps I shall learn. I mean to try. There is so much to be learnt everywhere; and when I was younger I would not be taught to be practical." She smiled with such beautiful doubt and humility, that Mr. Pilkington took courage to sit down beside her. The girl went on, still smiling, "You know that Mary Ann Allnut gave me up in despair years ago." At the recollection of her many failures Medea laughed audibly.

"But you will take a class in the Sunday school, or at any rate visit at some of the cottages? There is opportunity to be practical in many directions."

Medea threw her head back and opened her eyes widely upon him. A curious expression passed over her face, and a faint colour rose in her cheeks.

"I—I would rather not do anything of that sort, Mr. Pilkington. I might not teach children as you wish; and I could never pretend to tell any one about things that are a mystery to me—which I shall, perhaps, never understand."

The rest of the conversation became inaudible, for Apollo was asking a question.

"You find Lakenham a mighty dull place, don't you, Miss McCracken?" said this reprehensible young man, throwing volumes of compassion into his eyes as he looked down on the pensive face with the firelight playing upon it. Apollo somehow managed to imply deep commiseration for so much wasted sweetness.

Our skilful young lady was quite able and willing to throw back the shuttlecock of flirtation. She shook her head with doleful emphasis, contracting her eyebrows with the cultivated trick of despair.

"Dull! don't mention it. I was lively

once, really quite of a cheerful disposition, before we came to Flatshire. Look at me now. Why, I can hardly smile at grief, even when Mr. Donald Nichol rolls off his horse, or his mamma complains no English cook can make a haggis. I have tried everything to vary the monotony of my existence. I go out hunting—only there is never a fox. I make flannel petticoats, but——" Here Rachel suddenly lifted her eyes, and lo! their subdued melancholy had disappeared, and Apollo was dazzled by a look of bewildering fun. She went on without pause, "Ah, yes, flannel petticoats are exciting garments sometimes, especially when you're told they're all vanity! Mr. Longstaffe, have you ever witnessed the touching sight of an old woman crying because her petticoat has been gored? Do you know what a gore is? Can you imagine what a task it is to cut gores to some figures? Mrs. Giles was

disgusted with my stupidity. Why on earth didn't I put all the stuff in in plaits, as 'ud make it nice and comfortable and thick about the waist? What 'ud the weight singafy on a winter's morning?"

Miss Pilkington's modesty was sorely outraged by the mention of such a garment in the presence of masculine ears. When Letty joined in, "But, Miss McCracken, aunt Olivia told me it was a beautiful petticoat to give an old woman, shaped to the figure, feather-stitched and all. She wanted to ask Mrs. Giles to lend it her to take the pattern," the chaste lady felt under constraint to check the conversation. She whispered a reproof in Letty's ear. Apollo, seizing the various expressions on the faces of the ladies, fairly suspected the artless Rachel of attempting a joke at the spinster's expense.

The introduction of the notable gar-

ment was a delightful master stroke. He rejoined—

"Ingratitude of that kind must be hard to bear. But surely, Miss McCracken, you have felt that virtue is its own reward, and that your earnest endeavours to uproot the prejudices of Lakenham places you in the rank of heroines. The noble intention of shaping Mrs. Giles's figure—there is certainly a superfluity of something about the place she calls her waist—demands our sincere honour and gratitude."

Then he bowed towards her with mock solemnity, his bright face approaching hers very nearly—too near by many inches, thought Letty, who had suddenly become a prude for her neighbour's sake. Olivia was amazed at Apollo's speech, taking some of it to be the genuine expression of his mind. She glanced at her own well-braced figure in a mirror with satisfaction. No young man could, at any rate, accuse

her of neglect of her waist. Wrinkles might come and men might go, but her waist remained.

Aiming at conquest, Rachel was very charming indeed, full of undiscovered tricks and winning wiles. This little Delilah acted her part with consummate skill, and in her endeavours to attract she was successful. She was plaintive, gay, serious by turns, yet keeping the object of her visit always in view. It seemed, however, no easy matter to approach such a one as Medea with condescension. Rachel, of course, never for a moment forgot that the parish doctor was this girl's stepfather. It would never do to surrender her own dignity to one she considered as socially so far beneath her. Miss Pilkington had indeed mentioned something about "Godbold connections," which argued relatives of good standing. Still it was quite certain this obscure family living on the Green was not "in with the county."

Medea was too large-souled to be observant of artifice. If beauty dwells in the external eye of the beholder, how much more do ugliness, sin, and duplicity exist in the inward sight of the soul. The small signs which betray petty-minded women to each other were all unmarked by this unworldly Medea. Guileless and without envy herself, it was impossible for her to understand or fathom those little rivalries and animosities which make women such deadly enemies. All the chaff of vanity was quickly winnowed from her mind, and the words and actions that nourish spite and malice were unknown to her pure, unselfish soul. She construed even foolishness with charity, and translated much that was cruel into ignorance.

"You think yourself tolerant, I dare say," Apollo had once said in anger, "just because you don't notice people's faults; but you are really selfish and indifferent.

Oh yes, it's a pretty name to give to 'don't care,' is toleration."

This was not true at all; nevertheless, it had the appearance of being so to ordinary minds. In reality, it was difficult for Medea to realize wrong-doing in some shapes—such as meanness, subterfuge, and deceit. Thus, in seeming to gloss over the infirmities of her neighbours her tolerance appeared over-strained. As a matter of course, ordinary people—who can blame them?—despised her unworldly intelligence.

Later on Miss McCracken thought of Medea with wonder. She found it so difficult to realize that a very simple soul could lie concealed beneath so much solid learning. There was nothing of the serpent about Medea's wisdom. Yet it seemed to Miss McCracken that a large intellect ought to be able to take in elements of world, flesh, and devil-worship.

Medea had listened to the flannel-petticoat colloquy with amusement. Rachel's melancholy voice and childish aggrieved way of relating her failure was fascinating. The people she had known best were ponderous and learned, forbearing to trifle with anything in life. The home-circle was always bewildering at first, and all its light *persiflage* almost unintelligible to her staid mind.

"Yes, indeed, Lakenham is a dull place," said Apollo aloud, apparently in continuation of remarks gone before.

"Oh, Apollo, don't say that; it is where you were born."

Medea's unconsidered interruption was anything but welcome. The young man turned slowly and looked at her, speaking with a languid air of surprise.

"Pray don't interrupt so suddenly, Medea. I was going to congratulate you shortly on having shaken off your old fierce-

ness. Can you believe, Miss McCracken, that this sister of mine, so enthusiastic about our village, has not spent six months here in the last six years? Perhaps that may account for her favourable views of Lakenham."

Medea's eyes dilated as if she were in pain, more at the satirical tone than at the words. She did not even make a soft answer.

Rachel came quickly to the rescue, scattering fraternal amenities.

"Quite right, Miss Longstaffe. I like loyalty, and I am loyal to another 'little village' where I was born. This is not my final resting-place, I do hope." Here she paused. Catching a wicked gleam in Apollo's eyes, she went on demurely, "You must forgive me any little abuse of provincial ways, because I am a stranger to them all. You must not even feel angry if I have a fling at customs I have never

been brought up to respect—the wearing of clumsy flannel-petticoats amongst other things. Perhaps, Miss Longstaffe, you will help me to get rid of my early prejudices?"

The soft voice and gracious manners quickly won Medea to responsive frankness.

"I am afraid I can do very little," she said smiling, "for I too have prejudices to shake off."

Rachel eyed her curiously. "Not prejudices against frivolities, I do hope, for I should be so pleased if you and your sister would come to my dance on New Year's Eve."

At the little ducal court of Hornhausen, where Medea had resided so long, she had always been included in all festivities that went on. Though only companion to a German countess, she had been treated as an equal, and not relegated to the shelf of an attic bed-chamber when social gatherings

took place. Now she neither looked surprised nor honoured at the invitation accorded to her.

"We are not engaged," she said slowly, "but I do not think my sister has ever been to a party. Do you know she is deaf and dumb?"

Rachel dropped her voice. "She may enjoy looking at other people. And you—you will come?"

Then Medea assented. "If my mother is willing for Phil to come—yes, I will come gladly."

It was now so dark that Apollo had ventured to issue from his corner. He stood up to the extent of his six feet without fear of his boots coming under observation. Rachel began to wonder if that accomplished gentleman, Sir Bruce Onslow, would match this young nobody in comeliness, in stature, or in infectious mirth. Then she sighed a little. What a pity all

merits could not unite. Certainly Mr. Tom Ringrose, with his sallow complexion and bullet head, did not approach this young soldier in outward perfections. But, then, he was rich and had a position in the county! It would be certainly worth while to make closer inquiries concerning those Godbold relatives. The Godbolds should at once be looked out in Burke.

"I hope, Mr. Longstaffe, that you will be able to bring your sisters on the thirty-first? I suppose your leave extends for some time?" said Rachel suavely, as she stood up to take leave.

"I shall be most happy. My country does not require my immediate services, I am glad to say. We ought to be grateful to you for this laudable effort to dissipate dullness."

Then the siren, having accomplished her mission, gathered up her muff and tippet, departing with a pensive smile playing

about her lips. As she drove in at her own lodge gates, a dog-cart drove out. It was, however, too dark to make out the appearance of the departing visitors.

CHAPTER VIII.

A "PAS SEUL."

Lady Wrexham was a person of decision, always embracing a novel idea fervently. She was not going to be baulked in her project of circumventing Tom, or of striking another blow at her mother's antiquated code of propriety.

The first fine day after she had made her resolve to call on the McCrackens happened to be that Monday on which Miss Rachel took tea at the rectory.

At half-past three her ladyship ordered round her own vehicle, specified indefinitely as "my cart," and dauntlessly drew on her driving gloves. This conveyance was by

no means a handsome equipage, being of an anomalous description. Having been purchased in the last lord's time, it had spent a long period of retirement before being placed in the hands of a country coach-builder for restoration. It had issued once more to service if not to honour only after the shipping off of the more modern barouche, landau, coach, and victoria to the auctioneers. Sooth to say, it had now little varnish or grace of any kind hanging about it, nor would you have said it had seen better days. However, as long as it held together her ladyship held to it as a convenient means of locomotion.

The little lord, raised up on cushions, sat like a diminutive monkey beside his buxom mother, opening his lips occasionally to deliver sage remarks concerning the quadruped she drove. An elderly groom, Peter Cattanach by name, a henchman who had lived in the family all his life, and who in

consequence had no scruples about wearing a shabby livery, sat behind. This stolid menial bore the contumely of the more pampered with stoical philosophy. His wages were not diminished, and Peter Cattanach was of opinion that beer flowed more freely with a smaller staff to take reckoning of casks. This faithful servitor was much detested of old Mrs. Ringrose, who had vainly striven to detach him from the Ellesmore household. He was devoted to the young heir, aiding and abetting him in making acquaintance with stables and turf lore. For too true it was that this puny little imp was a chip of the old block —but a chip with a good deal more resistance.

"Breed is stronger than pasture," as a great novelist has told us; and though Mrs. Ringrose, on the maternal side of the house, duly set before his juvenile mind the responsibilities of noble birth and the enor-

mity of gambling transactions, he did not nibble so gladly of this insipid nourishment as he ought to have done. Peter Cattanach's stud-book, with stories told in the harness-room—tales concerning notable jockeys, famous horses, and the like, were much more welcome to his taste. I fear nothing the great madam said could change his little black fleece to a white one.

To Rachel's surprise, on her return from the rectory she found her most ornamental tea-table, the one with the real point lace, set out between the screens in the drawing-room. Two cushioned red satin chairs were drawn up close to the fire, and their lace antimacassars crumpled up to rags. Like a little bear, Miss McCracken felt constrained to cry fretfully, "Who has been sitting in my chair?" Next she put her inquiring little nose into the teapot, and noticed the cups had been used. The hand-painted cups from Paris, too! Some

one had made havoc with a fresh plum cake. With her foot on the fender, the young lady looked down on these signs and mused awhile. Then, hearing a servant approaching, she threw herself negligently down on one of the ill-used antimacassars. The footman brought in the lights, placed shades upon them, drew the curtains, leaving those naughty marble nymphs in outer darkness and cold, finally carrying off the tea equipage.

Rachel waited for Mr. McCracken, who, if he had news to tell, doubtless would not tarry. Rachel did not look up when, after a short delay, he advanced into the room. Without, however, raising her eyes she was quickly conscious that the pomp and vanity of this wicked world were evident in his bearing. His step was elastic though slow, and he hummed an indefinite air cheerfully —very indefinite was the air.

"You have had visitors, I see," she

remarked carelessly, after a pause, during which her papa continued to hum tremulously.

He had taken up his position on the hearthrug, swelling his waistcoat out like a pouter pigeon, beyond any curves of beauty, while he stretched one hand out behind him to the blaze of the logs.

"By-the-by, yes. A great pity, my dear, that you were not at home. Really a most charming person, her ladyship."

The man of biscuits made the most of "her ladyship," rolling the title round his tongue like one of his own machines rolled the pastes of flour and water and other adulteration.

Miss Rachel, with her eyes still cast down, toyed carelessly with the feathers in her hat, which lay on her lap.

"Her ladyship? Lady Wrexham?"

In vain she struggled to appear indifferent.

"To be sure. There's no other ladyships hereabouts that I've heard tell of. Didn't you see the earl's cards which she left? A most fortunate thing that I had not left the house before she drove up. An ugly little beggar that Viscount Ellesmore. She sent him on to Ringrose Abbey. The youngster was bound to tell 'em there that the countess was here. We shall have Madam Ringrose here herself in a jiffy."

Mr. McCracken's hilarious mood was very displeasing to Rachel. No doubt he had indecently manifested his joy at the honour done to him by her ladyship. She yawned with affected indifference, rising from her seat.

"The cards would have been enough, papa, without a personal interview to satisfy you that we are saved from social extinction. I am surprised that she came in—when I was out, too. I have heard

that Lady Wrexham is very proud and exclusive."

This was a base invention, for Rachel had never been told anything concerning her ladyship, for the very good reason that none of her acquaintance were on visiting terms with big folks. But still, how was she to come at Lady Wrexham's demeanour towards her parent if she scrupled to make some assertion which might provoke an answer or a contradiction ?

"Tut, tut ; stuff and nonsense. Proud ! not she. A very pleasant person—most affable, indeed. Why, she asked me how much I give for mutton in the carcass, and if I deal with wholesale firms for tea and sugar. I offered to get her a chest of tea from Green and Choker. There were no high stilts about her, I can tell you. No need to mind your p's and q's, for all she's a countess.

No company manners for her, I can swear."

Rachel, with her head pensively inclined, stared steadily into the fire.

"Did she ask for you?" she said with meek submission, as though marvelling at the ways of countesses. Oh, what unutterable pities that on Mr. McCracken had devolved the all-important task of making a first impression. And here had he been jigging about most indiscreetly, when he ought to have danced the stateliest minuet.

"Bless my life, girl, your wits are wool-gathering! Ask for me? No. Do you suppose a person in her position don't know *les convenances?*"

Mr. McCracken in his more expansive moments, most frequently after dinner, launched forth a French idiom. Miss Rachel, of course, in spite of her signal failures on the Continent, knew enough

of French to be able to writhe at his mouthing of false accents.

"When Simmons said you were not at home she looked a bit put out. Then she said she would get out and walk about the grounds till the dogcart came back from the Abbey, where she had to send a message. Why the deuce she sent the brat and didn't go herself bothers me. There ain't any ill-feeling between the families that I have heard of. Of course, as I was standing inside the door," —Mr. McCracken conformed to feminine practices in not indicting himself a listener —"I came forward and introduced myself, and told her to make use of my house as a resting-place."

Here our anguished heroine gave an involuntary shudder, as if she felt a cold wind. Her parent, who had a turn for dramatic action, was too much engaged in his rehearsal of his advance, with the

flourish of his hat, to give any attention to the spasm which passed over Rachel's features.

"A precious old screw she was driving. I wouldn't give a fi' pound note for the brute. And only a one-horsed affair, with the harness all to bits. As to the livery, if it weren't for the coronet on the buttons, you'd take it for a second-hand lot. The aristocracy have to go nohow in these days, and yet they pretend to look down on trade, when it keeps things up to the mark. I saw her ladyship's eye looking round and taking stock of things. She ain't one of them thoroughbred snorters with their heads in the air, not looking at the ground they tread on. She'll know the reason why of most things—small blame to her. I was never more taken aback in my life, than to find her such a very ordinary person. She don't know naught about art neither."

Mr. McCracken stuck his thumbs in his waistcoat pocket, and surveyed his pictures with approval.

As for Rachel, she was well-nigh speechless and beside herself with vexation. She only gave vent to a weak little "Oh, really," to intimate that she was listening.

"It took a goodish spell to get that rattle-trap machine to Ringrose and back, so after we had walked about outside, she had to come in and wait. Her ladyship was quite pleased with a basket of grapes I told Ferguson to cut. She knew the place well in Charteris's days, and asked what had become of the tapestry stuffs and old shields and battle-axes, and all that tin-kettle rubbish. The walls didn't look themselves without the hangings, she said. I should rather say not. It ain't every day of the week she claps eyes on fittings to match mine. Bless your life! I made her wink when I told her the price of my

statuary and furniture — paid for, too, as I said, down on the nail. The countess don't see that figure of value often in one room." Mr. McCracken drew breath.

"Go on," said Rachel in a faint voice.

Alas! he needed no spur to damn himself.

"That child is a poor little beggar to be a viscount—as sharp as a needle all the same. To hear the groom 'milording' a wizened-up monkey with breeches patched at the knees, and boots fit for a ploughboy, tickles you a bit at first. Yet for all he's so small, the young shaver has manners. I suppose he's always in the way of it. He called me sir, and took off his hat as though I was his equal."

Our admirable heroine's dreams of patronage and condescension to be bestowed upon the Longstaffes were dissipating rapidly. The pride of life and wealth evaporated completely this night, and for

once she retired to rest with a lowly heart. Would even the parish doctor have assaulted her ladyship with anything comparable to her papa's vulgar address and ostentatious oratory? Reflecting in the privacy of her chamber on his sayings and doings, she was distracted with shame and anguish.

Mr. McCracken's *pas seul* had been a lamentable failure. Nevertheless the young lady gained courage to make a return call within the week. Her ladyship, grubbing amongst bulb roots, saw the arrival of the cobs, and sent the little Ellesmore into the house to say not at home. But Miss Rachel out of the corner of her most cunning eye had perceived from afar a figure hastening into the shelter of an out-house. On the morrow, undaunted, she boldly forwarded a card of invitation to the Lodge. It is not to be supposed that the interview so graphically described by Mr. McCracken was without its influence

on Lady Wrexham's mind and actions. Not that she was high-minded or possessed of aristocratic prejudices, or even given to despising a humanity with shaky h's and dubious French; but Mr. McCracken was undoubtedly vulgar, not only outwardly, but dyed with that far more unalterable colour of commonness which proceeds from the mind, and not from habits of association or faults of education. She shuddered, recalling what manner of man might become Tom's father-in-law. At this time this fear materially assisted Rachel's ambition by keeping her ladyship on terms of amity with the biscuit people.

It now becomes necessary to explain that some years back Mr. Tom had got himself into a serious scrape with an astute young lady in the theatrical profession, and that he had been extricated with difficulty from a precarious situation. Laura had then gallantly come to the rescue of

her brother, persuading the designing young female to compromise matters with a sum of money instead of claiming damages publicly, and blazoning her recreant lover's folly. It is doubtful if this seductive minx would have surrendered her just claims, had her antecedents been altogether irreproachable; but, of course, Lady Wrexham was not aware that Miss Leonora Fitzmaurice had already figured in a breach of promise case, winning her action in a canter.

A lady who takes to the trade of extracting written promises of marriages from foolish young gentlemen at late supper parties, prefers, after her first public success, to come to terms in a less costly and public manner. Her ladyship, however, took great credit to herself for the skilful way in which she had managed the affair and out-generalled the enchantress.

This episode in Tom's history had been

concealed from the infirm old gentleman who, in name, yet held the sceptre at Ringrose; and though Mrs. Ringrose was not openly supposed to have an inkling of that shameful matter, her august nose had certainly felt the grindstone of filial indiscretions. However, she plastered it up with the salve of family pride, and scented out the follies of other noble families with no abatement of malice or strengthening of charity. It might be that the consciousness of her own scar lent an extra zest to the discovering of her neighbours' sore places.

Lady Wrexham, with the recollection of Tom's former escapade in her mind, brooded disconsolately on her return from Lakenham Hall. Whatever she might have to endure in the battle, the biscuit-maker's daughter should be defeated in her ambitious schemes. He should never marry that girl if she could help it.

"Mamma, granny said she would come and see you to-morrow. She gave me five shillings for speaking the truth, she said, and Peter Cattanach is going to lay it on Hotspur for the Two Thousand."

Her ladyship was moved from her reflections by this feeble little pipe.

"For speaking the truth, Ellesmore? Does she think I bring you up to tell lies?" answered Laura in hot resentment. "What did you tell her, my boy?"

"I said that Peter and me was sent on to give your love and for her to see my new boots, and that you was going to have tea at Lakenham, and that Mr. McCracken was a jolly old cuss."

Lady Wrexham smiled grimly, and touched up her old brown horse.

"And was that all she said?"

The boy screwed up his little face. "Yes; she didn't *say* nothing more. But, oh, mamma, her mouth went down and her

eyes went up ever so. I thought she was going to choke. Then Uncle Tom he came in, and when I told him we had been to Lakenham, he looked angry too. What is it all about? Peter says the fat little man makes biscuits and has a big shop in London. Are they dog biscuits, mamma? His stable is first rate. My! don't I wish you'd seen the harness-room."

And so Lord Ellesmore chattered, quoting much of his oracle Peter Cattanach, and violating the Queen's English at every breath.

CHAPTER IX.

LIES CIRCUMSTANTIAL.

It was on the third day after Christmas that Sir Bruce Onslow arrived at Lakenham. After much scheming and plotting on his behalf, as you have seen, it was remarkable that he made his entry in a very unobtrusive way. Not with a flourish of trumpets to declare his importance did he come. No telegrams flew to precede his arrival and no obsequious valet or abundant luggage formed part of his progress. Rather he came like a poor relation, as Rachel said to herself, recalling her Uncle David's modest portmanteau and his fervent anxiety to save the servants

trouble. Sir Bruce arrived by an earlier train than he had given notice of, walking from Malham, carry his precious fiddle-case under his arm, and forbearing, after the custom of some fine gentlemen, to rail at the absence of a fly at a country station.

It was a raw, damp day, and the roads were muddy. But he tucked up his trousers and started off at a good pace in the direction indicated by the most courteous of station-masters. Mr. McCracken had hitherto, not to the manner of landowners born, been very lavish in the matter of hares and rabbits bestowed on this functionary. He received in consequence due meed of deference and civility. Sir Bruce was even entreated by the suave Mr. Goodsby to take a seat in his private residence while he sent a messenger to the Hall to announce an arrival; but the stranger impatiently rejected the polite persecution, and left Goodsby wondering

who he could be. The city folk who had hitherto come as guests to the Hall had been ready to pay in something better than cold thanks Mr. Goodsby's attentive offices.

Miss Rachel always duly considered her complexion and digestion. She took daily exercised to maintain health and looks. This afternoon she was cultivating a good appearance for the sake of the expected guest, and, in company of the Misses Wilson and their toy terrier "darling lovely Snip," as the enthusiastic Miss Dottie designated a wheezy little black and tan, patrolled the high road outside the park. The Bedmondstone road had been chosen by the young ladies for their constitutional as being the liveliest and the cleanest in the vicinity. To-day it was neither particularly lively or clean, and they ambled along without much cheerfulness of mien. But when these maidens espied from afar a manly figure striding along with the gait of a

practised pedestrian, the conversation no longer crept on trivial wheels.

"A man!" said Dottie hopefully, in cheerful surprise.

"Is my petticoat too short?" said her sister Sophia, glancing down with complacency at what she considered small feet. Her grenadier proportions removed her eyes so far from her extremities that perhaps they appeared so from that lofty altitude.

Miss Rachel quickly surmised that the gentlemanly individual approaching them was the expected guest, but gave no sign to her companions of this conjecture.

She passed him by with nonchalant concern, lifting her face upwards to Sophia Wilson, who was five foot ten in her stockings, thus affording the stranger a view of her profile, which she knew was not a bad one. This disregard of the strange pedestrian provoked her friend's wrath.

"Why didn't you look, Rachel? Who can he be? You *must* know. How very distinguished-looking. And I do so adore a man with dark eyes and a beard," said Dottie in tones quite heartrending as she took a second glance over her shoulder.

"Who, where, what? *That* man? How can I tell? The piano-tuner, I expect, or perhaps the man who is going to play the fiddle next week."

Dottie sternly checked her companion's levity.

"I am sure he was a *gentleman*, Rachel."

"Perhaps, Dottie, Rachel has so many gentlemen friends that they are a matter of indifference to her," said Sophia with an attempt at sarcasm.

"How do you know he was a gentleman, Dottie? I did not notice if he had a gold watch-chain or lavender kid gloves!"

"Don't be absurd, Rachel. He had that *air* which is unmistakable. The eagle eye,

the high bred nose, and the look of pride and strength, and—— "

Miss Dottie was addicted to romance, and obtained sustenance of light literature on the sly. Rachel interrupted rudely.

"Ah! but I've seen a carrion crow with an eye which would pierce your soul, when it saw a dead donkey. Dottie, did you ever see a dead donkey, or did you ever meet anybody that had seen a dead donkey?"

Then Rachel, glancing at the young ladies' faces, went off into peals of laughter. At any rate, she had diverted their conjectures from the pedestrian.

Said Sophia with infinite pity, "Really what a child you are! There is no getting you to be serious for a moment."

And all the time that fertile little brain was working like a restless steam-engine. Serious? Good gracious, she hoped not. To look serious would indeed be fatal to her plans. Ah, what a brisk dance she

led them. Those young people never for a moment caught up her mind and intentions.

Very shortly she insinuated her hand through Dottie's arm. Forthwith she began to lag and lean heavily on this good-natured friend. Then she decided that she was fatigued, and expressed a determination of taking a short cut home over the fields.

"But I thought you said the footpaths were so dirty?" demurred Sophy, who, having corns, and wearing high-heeled boots suitable to Clapham pavements, naturally objected to face ploughed fields.

"You can go round by the road if you like," said Rachel indifferently; "but Dottie and I will go home this way. There's no fun in toiling back through the same ruts. Even mud has a variety of aspects. Besides, I have forgotten to give Simmons my letters to post. By, by, Sophy." Then, as she turned into the nearest gate, she called

back, "If you have a tract in your pocket leave it at the first thatched cottage you come to. It would be a deed of charity to let Mrs. Giles have 'Prickles in the Pillow,' or 'Creases in the Wedding Garment.'"

Miss Wilson never took her walks abroad in town or country without considering how many spiritually poor or hungry souls she might meet. Thus a little packet of pious leaflets were daily strewed by the wayside by her diligent hand. She occasionally remarked that many of them fell on stony ground. Sometimes these seeds of righteousness were surreptitiously planted in gentlemen's coat-pockets or cartridge-pouches. Occasionally a notable sinner had been heard to wonder how the deuce the texts got into his cigar-case. [illegible]ter-writers in country houses had been [illegible]ided by meeting a call to repentance be[illegible] the pages of a blotting-book. [illegible]h wi[illegible]ed ones had sat them down to indite matter

that was not good, such as recommending a doubtful horse to a trusting friend, or staving off a pressing creditor with a string of plausible inventions, the story of Ananias and Sapphira appeared rather pointed. "Boast not thyself of to-morrow" was not a text likely to encourage a fortune-hunter who took up his pen to brag to his Pythias of his success with an heiress.

There was no end to the really excellent devices for gaining souls and advancing mission-work as pursued by the dauntless Sophia.

She rose immediately to Rachel's bait of a redemption, with the short-sighted gullibility of a fierce Christian.

The amiable but unfortunate Dottie was then raced home over field and fell, by devious ways of hedges and ditches, to the utter destruction of a smart satin skirt and town boots. She was good-natured without dispute. According to some of

us she might have been foolish. She was "a weak vessel" in Sophia's phraseology, but without any of the disagreeable virtues of the one who trimmed her lamp with such sedulous care for a great hereafter.

In spite of ridge and furrow, our able little Rachel steered her companion back to the Hall in ten minutes. The pair only drew breath on the doorstep, Rachel with a pretty flush, but Dottie breathing stertorously and of woebegone mien. She looked down with sorrow at her smart boots when Curtis was summoned to her assistance. At the maid's touch they came to pieces, peeling off like brown paper. It was not consoling to hear Rachel's musical laughter. The very important letters, for the despatching of which she had been hurried home in such an unceremonious manner, proved to have been collected half an hour since by the

trusty Simmons. It was surely very strange that Rachel should forget that a standing order had been given to gather up her correspondence from her writing-table when completed.

Of course no arrival had taken place at the Hall, nor would the young man met, walking at a smart pace on the Malham road, be likely to appear for a full quarter of an hour. The route encircling the park was a circuitous one, and the short cuts would not be known to a stranger. With the aid of her deft handmaid, Miss McCracken had time to tire herself becomingly. She had before made up her mind as to the gown she would wear, and the attitude she would assume on Sir Bruce Onslow's arrival. She now got rid of her strong boots, happily upholding the fame of their maker, and, unlike Dottie's, not yielding to watery influences, and encased her feet in neat

shoes. Her hair was taken down—some of it taken off. Then a swift process of frizzing and waving and building up into compact little curls and plaits went on. Finally her slim figure was slipped into a smart tea-gown, a compromise between a robe *à la Chinese* and *à la Watteau*, the latest creation of Madame Volant's genius, calculated to bewilder the masculine intelligence with subtle plaits and gores, slashes and knots of colour peeping from unexpected places.

My pen is incompetent to portray the extravagances of Miss McCracken's costume. The ravishing effects of waterfalls of lace, of cunning embroideries, of ribbons and fallals innumerable, must be left to the imagination. Suffice it to say that Rachel herself was quite satisfied with the result of her dressmaker's skill. She turned her little person backwards and forwards, sideways and slantways; she

ducked and stretched, bobbed and pranced to her heart's content in front of a big cheval-glass. The only thing she did not do was to stand upside-down.

When the front door bell rang she was already in the drawing-room, practising before another mirror; but when the expected guest was ushered in he saw nobody. Advancing tranquilly, he beheld a young lady ensconced luxuriously, a book upon her knees, between the screens. She rubbed her eyes and yawned audibly at the interruption.

The new-comer was tall and dark. He had a foreign cut of beard and remarkably handsome eyes, all of which things Rachel discovered at a glance. Then she rose up languidly to meet him. Meeting her thus, with a dignified air on her features, and with the voluminous folds of her flowing gown concealing her slim figure, none could compare her to the active sylph who,

half an hour ago, had frisked across the fields, slipping through gaps and covering the ground like a greyhound.

Ay, verily, my friend Rachel, you were a consummate little actress! But at all times and in all places the young women of our day put on many faces, and assume many forms. Men know what it all means, and do not like them the less, or take warning by the fate of any predecessors.

The man who came in, carrying his fiddle-case as tenderly as a mother carries her baby, glanced curiously towards Miss McCracken as she rose with the air of a hostess on her best behaviour. She bent her head in one of the most dignified bows she had practised.

"I am sorry there was no one to meet you, but——" she began with a regretful note as he came nearer.

"But I arrived before my time, you mean," he said in a deep-toned voice which

matched his face, and somehow recalled a knight of the middle ages. "Miss McCracken, I believe?" he said with a shade of doubt in the remark, as he laid his violin-case down carefully on a mosaic table.

Rachel's quick ears caught the trace of uncertainty or surprise in his accent.

"Yes. You find it difficult to believe I am my papa's *little girl*."

Rachel did not smile as she hung her head pensively. She very well knew that Mr. McCracken always alluded to her as a thing of insignificance.

"I beg your pardon for the mistake. I certainly did not expect you would be *quite* so much grown up."

Then the young lady divined he was satirical, and had partly penetrated her wiles. He surveyed her lovely gown with a critical stare. She had dressed herself up in vain to meet a man satiated with

artificial phases of life. In a moment she knew she had made a false move in this direction.

"Since I am so much grown up, then, you see you will have to treat me with becoming respect," she said with a light laugh.

He was quick to understand what her words did not exactly intimate. If my papa is nothing more than a vulgar tradesman, and you think because you are a man of superior station you may take liberties here, you are very much mistaken, and I shall expect you to treat me with due meed of courtesy. Oh, Sir Bruce, with all your practised skill, you will find it a hard matter to fence with this young person.

"Then, I will begin by apologizing humbly for my premature appearance. I am proverbial for missing my trains. On principle I disapprove of hurry. I would sooner be knocked down by a cab than play

the undignified part of running across a street. To-day I so fully intended not to miss my train, that I arrived at St. Pancras an hour too soon, and found myself in the nick of time for an earlier one. Will you accept my excuses?"

Was this an ingenious fabrication? His dark eyes were quite unfathomable, and no gleam of fun perceptible. Yet Rachel had an uncomfortable feeling that he might be laughing at her. It certainly sounded a very absurd excuse. With a little pettish air she sank back in her seat.

"Ah, indeed, you are unpunctual. Then I am afraid you will find our rules very tiresome; we are the most exact people. Papa carries his method into all the affairs of life."

She looked down gravely at the frills of her gown, and very pretty she looked in this attitude. The young man, who had come down to Lakenham only with a view

to some good shooting, began to think the place had other recommendations. He was going to be amused. The airs and graces and smart wits of his host's "little girl" were a little out of the common. She had more than a sufficiency of spirit and address, and might prove an interesting study. He was not an easy victim to sweet looks and seductive graces, though the society of women was almost a necessity to him. They never bored him, except they were old and ugly. He dissected their motives and analyzed their sentiments like a skilled anatomist of hearts, as he was; and the study was interesting to him. Rachel was not ill pleased at this moment by a diversion caused by Dottie Wilson's entrance. It was necessary for her to consider what line of fascination to take with her guest. Enjoyment out of his visit she certainly intended to have, and profit as well—profit publicly, if not individually.

I cannot assert confidently that she had not thought of him as a possible husband; but she was far too discreet to let herself be knocked down at the first bid. She had put a reserve price on her fortune and attractions, and meant to have, in any case, a partner of good birth, and good manners, and good looks, if possible.

The disconsolate Dottie, who had discarded her draggled skirts and pulpy boots, came down to the drawing-room arrayed in an old serge gown, which had seen much service in district-visiting. She carried a bag full of patches, wherewith she was making a charity quilt. There would be ample time to get herself into a smart dinner frock before the much-talked-of guest arrived. Dottie had never met a real baronet before. She might, indeed, have come across at aldermanic feasts an ex-lord mayor, a knight, or newly created baronet; but he was always married, and

generally in the grocery or haberdashery line. He usually had a crimson countenance and fully developed figure, and certainly could boast of no ancestors. The line of Onslows was, however, of very ancient degree. Its impoverished condition lent a halo of romance to its last descendant, who happened, moreover, to be handsome and talented. Miss Dottie had no maid, nor was her wardrobe extensive. She had sat up last night into the small hours to elaborate her evening toilette by the addition of sundry bows and tags, copied from one of Rachel's lovely gowns.

At the sight of the supposed piano-tuner sitting in friendly converse with her faithless friend, she started in dismay. A look of good honest indignation gave life to her heavy features, as she took in with feminine appreciation the richness and newness of Rachel's apparel.

"Miss Dorinda Wilson — Sir Bruce Onslow. Good gracious! Dot dear, what is that large garment you are at work on?"

The angry damsel plumped herself down in the background with a forcible effort to keep her temper; but the tears were in her eyes.

"Allow me—you have dropped your thimble. That seems a sort of Joseph's coat—a thing of many colours."

The young man picked up Dottie's thimble, large and useful, twisting it round one of his own slender fingers. The endeavour to conciliate was vain. A stubborn look fixed itself on her features as the long slim hand was extended towards her.

"It is charity work," she said curtly.

Thereafter nothing would induce her to open her lips. She sat in stony silence, with her head bent over bright diamonds

and octagons, while her face flamed with the wrath she nursed closely. Oh, the traitress that Rachel had been!

"Surely, Miss McCracken, we have met before to-day. I was not sure of it till Miss Wilson came in. There were three young ladies on the road to Malham. Afterwards I saw two of them dancing gaily over some ploughed fields. I stood by a stile to admire their energy, and felt inclined to take out my violin and play a tarantella accompaniment."

Rachel, knitting her brows, looked down, shaking her head. Then she suddenly thought fit to change her mind, and, casting up her eyes, smiled with a bewitching look of fun. These sudden transitions always forced attention. And Rachel knew they were charming tricks.

"Now, really, are you quite sure that we were those active young ladies, Sir Bruce?"

"Quite sure," he said, with a very emphatic nod; "and you can't think how much my respect and admiration is increased in consequence."

There was a marked meaning as he bowed with exaggerated deference.

"You see, Dottie, we are found out after all," said Rachel plaintively.

But if she hoped for support from her former faithful ally she was much mistaken. This one refused to look up from her work, muttering some inaudible rejoinder under her breath.

Rachel went up to dress for dinner that evening with the certainty that the newly arrived guest was a man of superior ability and great penetration, also that his personal charms were more than equal to repute.

CHAPTER X.

THE TRIUMPH.

"She looks for all the world like a queen, that she does! To be sure, I'd be wholly friz in Janiwary with a gownd tucked in at the bosom and turned up at the sleeves; but there's some as don't make no account of cold. But ain't it a bit ondecent before men folks, Miss Medie, to be uncovering of your neck?" Mary Ann Allnut gave her dubious verdict regarding her young lady's attire with characteristic frankness and with the privileged liberty of an old servant. "I'll warrant you, missis, as your white stuff wasn't bought gain. You was always one to favour the best of qualities in stuffs.

Dear, dear, only to think what a processioning there'll be at the Hall to-night. We're boun' sartin to have some chutch-goings after such gay doings. Old Pilkington will mebbe pocket a fee for that old Olivy at last. I hear that them two misses from the rectory, the old and the young 'un, have kep' their horse on its legs ivvery day of this week back'ards and forrards to Miss Prinkerton's. Miss Olivy, I can tell you, she's to have a gownd made of pink cobweb—tulle they calls it—as is not suitable to her time of life. Miss Medie child, you're in the right to make selection of a white gownd. It sets me all on a fidget to look at a flantum flatherum all sorts of colours."

Mary Ann's profuse criticism went on unchecked.

Our young dandy Apollo was sitting bolt upright on the straightest chair in the room, instead of lolling comfortably,

after his wont. He was arrayed in an expansive and starchy shirt, with the incomparable glaze of newness upon its surface. No domestic laundry work could produce anything equal to the shine of the hosier. Though compelled by the urgency of his collar's stiffness to hold his head erect, he was able to turn his eyes on the domestic circle standing about Medea and Philomela.

This was, of course, the night of Miss McCracken's festivity, and they were arrayed in ball-going costume. A gala dress had been prepared for Philomela regardless of expense. Mrs. Morgan had herself made two journeys to Bedmondstone to ensure the beauty and fitness of her young daughter's attire. This light and lissom young girl looked like a bit of thistle-down, with tulle skirts extended about her, as she pirouetted round her admiring mother, drawing back the clouds

of drapery now and then to show her little white satin slippers. Then she would make a pretty pretence of exhaustion, and unfurl proudly a beautiful fan of white feathers—a gift from the doctor. She had never worn such finery before, and her innocent pleasure was childishly apparent.

Oh, Phil, sweet Phil, how radiant was your innocent face! Were you not compassed round with infinite love and care? Was there ever any slackness of affection towards you? Truly your life was ever full of joy and peace, and no shadow of sorrow or discontent ever marred its serene brightness.

"Apollo has promised to dance with me," she signed rapidly to her mother.

That little matron stood with her cap wildly astray, and with sundry pins and needles lodged temporarily on her plump person.

"Somebody must subdue that young

person," remarked Apollo with feigned uneasiness. "I can't undertake to control such quicksilver."

Mrs. Morgan, interpreting this speech to the girl, slipped in her finger-spelling.

"You are not to get so excited, your brother says."

Philomela, frowning, slapped her mother's hand in pretended indignation, holding up her own thumb and forefinger in the proper curve.

"C, C, C," she repeated vehemently in signs under her mother's eyes. This good lady spelt "excited" with an *s*. Then the dumb girl turned towards Mary Ann, who yet stood in the doorway. "Mrs. Jagger has not seen—send her," she signed imperiously.

But at that moment there was a diversion in Medea's favour; for Mrs. Morgan's eye had caught sight of something that offended it—something she had not previously observed.

"Where did you get your bracelet, Medea?" she said peremptorily to her eldest daughter, as she touched the beautiful round arm, that she had never seen uncovered in all the years of Medea's womanhood. The contour of the girl's neck, and the modelling of her bust and arms were nearly perfect.

Mrs. Morgan, quickly finding her spectacles, looked more closely at the thin line of gold encircling the firm white flesh. Some kind of catch or screw made it more secure than any ordinary snap. It was the first ornament of the nature of a bangle that Charlotte had ever seen, for novelties in jewellery did not travel frequently to Lakenham.

Medea shrank visibly at her mother's touch—a touch without tenderness. There was a sort of aggression in her fingers' clasp. Medea being so slow to answer, the doctor turned round and looked too.

"Who gave you this, Medea?" repeated Mrs. Morgan angrily.

"Mother, don't, please. I cannot tell you." Medea looked straight before her, but her voice faltered in an unusual way. She was paler than before. The doctor saw that her hand trembled. "It will not come off; it is made with a screw," continued Medea, after a little pause. "It must be done by a jeweller."

The distress in her voice was quite apparent now.

"Where the deuce is Mrs. Jagger? What a fuss about a trumpery bracelet, mother. Do let Medea alone. Are we to stay here all night?" interposed Apollo, with an endeavour to change the current of attention.

In vain. No longer to be put off, the outraged mother poured forth her cherished anger and bitterness.

"Do not interfere, Apollo. I will speak

my real mind this once. Indeed, it *was* time I sent for Medea, though you did all think it cruel of me to force her to come home against her will. Only to think that a child of mine should be receiving presents secretly, and be ashamed to tell her own mother who they come from! I always said there was something wrong in all these independent ways. In my time no young girl was at liberty to run away from her home for the sake of education, and to live abroad with doubtful people. You may call them counts and countesses if you like, but I've no belief in their being respectable like our own aristocracy. A girl who associates with that sort of people will lose her good name and the respect of her friends. That will be the end of you, Medea, I quite expect."

The mother paused breathless, and the daughter looked straight towards the doctor

with heartrending appeal in her lovely eyes. Oh, shield her now, good man!

On urgent occasions Dr. Morgan had sometimes the whip hand over Charlotte. The piteous regard fixed on him at this moment fired his phlegmatic disposition. There was evidently something tragic hidden behind this trifle—some episode that represented a sorrowful recollection to Medea; and it was not right that she should be goaded by the prickings of her mother's tongue. Before he could interpose, however, the girl seemed to rally from the confusion into which she had been thrown. She gained courage to speak, even to defend herself. She threw her noble head back in a way that seemed to challenge every contradiction. Truth shone in her face.

"I am not ashamed, mother—never ashamed. I have been foolish and blind—oh, so blind; but there is nothing

wrong in anything I have done away from you. Only I cannot tell you about this"—she touched the thin band of gold, almost with repulsion—"or who gave it me. Can't you understand it does not concern me alone? Dr. Morgan, speak for me. You know you always said we were not to tell tales out of school. I have been to school—oh, such a school."

Her voice broke suddenly. The effort to be playful, as she turned her face towards her stepfather, was very pitiful. Her breath came quickly as she spoke, lifting the amethyst cross she wore. Alas! no light breath could raise the heavier cross laid upon her suffering soul.

It is not easy to give a trivial turn to any conversation after a human heart has betrayed some wound. It seems to savour of a want of reverence for the dignity of sorrow. Nevertheless, the doctor, whose office was healing in all its branches,

resolved to apply a biting caustic to his wife's mind.

"Charlotte, my dear, let young folks be if they choose to hold their love-affairs sacred. When you used to receive valentines and rubbish of that kind, when lovers sighed at your feet, you did not publish their follies or cry their names on the housetops."

Mrs. Morgan took up a stray pin from the table and stabbed herself unwittingly with it in her fervour of denial.

"Lovers, John!" Here she tossed her cap. "I soon sent them to the rightabout, I can tell you. I was never one to encourage any man with false hopes, as you know,"—the doctor smiled—"or to accept presents. I ask you, is it respectable for a modest girl to accept a gift of this sort, and wear it night and day, just, as I may say, like a wedding-ring? Medea can't deny that some *man* gave it to her. There'd

be no secret about it if it wasn't a lover." Medea stood perfectly still, in that eloquent stillness which is so powerfully convincing of suffering. One of her hands rested on a chair as if for support. "Medea, have you engaged yourself to some man? I have a *right* to know this much." Mrs. Morgan seemed to pant in her rage.

The girl gave a long fluttering breath. It sounded as though her sore heart was rent.

"No." The single word was clear and emphatic.

The mother looked round victorious. There was an "I-told-you-so" sort of air about her. Neither the doctor or Apollo would meet her triumphant glance, and Philomela, intently scanning all the faces, failed to understand what it all meant.

"Mother, why do you scold Medie?" she signed at last, as she perceived that

angry words were being launched at her sister.

But Mary Ann returning at this moment with Mrs. Jagger, the dumb girl forgot the disturbance, and danced across the room.

"Am I not a beautiful fine lady to-night?" she signed, making a curtsy.

The two servants could both interpret Miss Phil's finger language, and would spell their answers after a phonetic fashion, which often sorely puzzled the dumb girl.

The old woman lifted her hands in significant admiration as the girl fluttered across the open space cleared for the display of such unusual trains.

Medea stood in the same fixed attitude as before, as if unmindful of any interruption. The lamp shed its full light on her sad troubled face. As Mrs. Jagger approached her she started and turned a bewildered look upon the old servant.

"Your fine feathers don't give you the

look of a ball-goer, Miss Medie. What ails you to-night, child?"

Mrs. Morgan's firstborn was the old woman's chief darling of the doctor's adopted family.

Medea smiled, but with those lines of sweet gravity about her lips which sometimes make a smile the saddest effort we can look at.

"But surely, Jagger, you never saw a prettier gown than mine. It was Dr. Morgan who gave it me, you know, and you must say that I also look a 'beautiful fine lady,' as Phil calls it."

Mrs. Jagger shook her head. "Ay, ay; the gown is well enough. There's handsomer frocks that never makes girls look as grand as you. You're not the sort as a gown makes any difference to. There's some as is like poor victuals, as needs to be fashed and hashed and done up with trimmings and laces and rubbish; but

you're one as the plainer you're dressed the more notice is taken of the shape and colour of you." Here she glanced towards Mrs. Morgan, who made a pretence of settling one of Phil's fluttering ribbons. A smouldering hostility existed between the doctor's old servant and Mrs. Morgan. It broke out actively sometimes when Medea was at home; for Mrs. Jagger resented the mother's gibes and bitterness towards her eldest-born. "To be sure, Miss Medie, there is some who wouldn't understand the beauty of one of God's angels out of the sky. But you don't look the sort to like jigging about in men's arms, and I don't believe as you do."

Medea, being tall, laid her hand upon the old servant's shoulders, and looked at her with a sweet smile.

"Perhaps you are right, my dear, kind, knock-me-down old Jagger, who never said a flattering word to me in all my life! It

doesn't suit my soul's complexion to think of ambling and skipping about and enjoying myself in the way other girls do. I never was a light-hearted one, was I? But I'm going to be young and sprightly for one night. I shall enjoy myself and see Prince Charming, and make no end of conquests to tell you about. There now, give me my cloak and my gloves, and don't you ever dare to say you paid any one a compliment. Good night, Dr. Morgan. Yes, I'm coming, Apollo."

Apollo, after keeping them waiting while he was dressing, now hurried them off, having an idea that Medea might break out in tears if Mrs. Morgan resumed her hostile attitude.

It was remarkable that Medea was the only one of the Longstaffe family who had never called the doctor father. But perhaps she loved him, recognizing his solid worth more deeply than they all.

Her fealty to her dead parent was not displeasing to her stepfather. As Medea drew near to her mother to bid her "good night," Mrs. Longstaffe made a pretence of stirring the fire. The girl drew back quickly. But when Philomela, a moment later, all unperceiving of this rebuff to her sister, threw her arms round the mother's broad shoulders, she turned with a loving smile for her dumb daughter.

The estrangement and reserve which had grown up in the long course of years between Medea and her mother was hard to fathom, difficult to account for fully. But it was apparent now on the surface of things. Such dire alienations between near relations are very sad to look at, sadder still to feel if there is a great and loving heart on one side.

Oftentimes Charlotte would call her eldest-born a changeling, lashing her rancour, and nursing her grievances with a most unnatural reversal of parental sentiments.

In the darkness of the rumbling fly which conveyed the Longstaffe party to the Hall, Medea sat in sackcloth and ashes. She lived over her life again, wailing inwardly with an ever ready willingness to condemn herself.

"It is all my fault, all my fault." The bitter fruits of repentance were oftentimes Medea's food. "I would follow my own good in my own way. I could not be content with small things and little attainments. I thought that I would grow cramped with personal loves and family bonds; I sighed for a wider life, and now I am like an outcast, alone in the day of my trouble." Something after this wise the thoughts passed through her mind.

It was true that the little rift between herself and her mother had gone on widening during every absence, but she had not known how broad the gulf was till now. She had noticed years ago that her mother

never confided domestic worries to her, or the little facts and trivial incidents which make daily life interesting. The maternal epistles had been rare and brief, their wording distant, their advice cautious and cold. Medea knew quite well that cheery, chatty, misspelt letters were despatched every week to Flossie, but for her there was no part in such frivolity or merriment.

There was now at this time a grief hanging over her, almost what she held a disgrace. But she could not even speak of it to her nearest and dearest. She might only look at her sorrow in the dark night hours, and, facing it, weep over her desolation and loneliness. Yes, indeed, when life's stern reality and the evanescence of love were brought near to her it seemed a poor consolation to have sciences at her finger ends and certificates beyond her desire.

Would nothing now avail to bridge over

this chasm of coldness and alienation? Did her mother forget that she had also carried this child in her bosom?

"Bless me, even me also, oh, my mother," was the yearning cry of her deep heart. Daily it seemed to her she prayed for bread of affection and was given the stones of coldness and recrimination.

Alas! it was too true that Charlotte loved to sting her meek and unresisting child. She could see the smarting of her sensitive daughter beneath the lash of contumely, and redoubled her efforts to prove her an alien.

"Don't trouble your sister," she would say to Phil many a time in Medea's presence; "she does not like having to leave her books." Or to the doctor it might be: "Please remember, John, that Medea is a visitor. You must not ask her to run errands."

The scholarly Nicholas had not been

thin-skinned, but he had been a taskmaster of great severity. Charlotte had not practised sarcasm and innuendo at his expense, and had she done so he would have been impervious. But in these days prosperity and ease had perverted Mrs. Morgan's heart to hardness, and she avenged herself for her former sufferings at Mr. Longstaffe's hands by cherishing an unnatural feeling of anger towards his child, who had thwarted her desire and turned out a brilliantly intellectual woman.

When the Longstaffes' fly drew up at its destination, the last of a long string of nondescript vehicles, the Hall was in a blaze of light. None of this party had entered its doors recently, and the transformation worked in the old-fashioned abode they had scampered about in childhood amazed them all. Even on ordinary occasions the gorgeous decorations and upholstery selected by Mr. McCracken

would have astonished them; but these familiar corridors and apartments transformed by illuminations and flowers, which happily concealed a multitude of glaringly vulgar sins, took them by surprise.

"It doesn't seem at all like the old place," Medea said, with a regretful look, as she trod the crimson pile carpet.

"By Jingo! but Miss McCracken is a girl who knows how to do things," remarked Apollo, as his eyes surveyed the wax lights and the flowers. "Our fellows couldn't have done it better."

This young man was still youthful enough to refer all matters in comparison to his own corps.

Some days before her ball Rachel's horizon had begun to clear. Dating from Lady Wrexham's gracious acceptance of her invitation the lesser vexations seemed to diminish, and unexpected recruits rallied round her.

Mrs. Proteus wrote a friendly letter, volunteering to bring a party of guests, not forgetting to send her kind regards to her *cousin*, Sir Bruce Onslow. The weather being unusually mild, Miss Jessie Nichol had at the eleventh hour obtained her papa's permission to set aside the restriction put on party going. A bevy of presentable daughters belonging to the banker at Oldford had made their charms known to Rachel, and had been duly called upon and invited. But to Miss McCracken the presence of the distinguished couple from Ellesmore Lodge was the crowning feature of her entertainment. What did it signify if that very plain-looking Mrs. Hungerford and a host of squireens and squiresses of the Ringrose faction, obedient to the frown of their divinity, would shed no light on the affair? Of course they would hear of the success at Lakenham Hall from their several rectors; for the

clergy naturally came to the front in great force on this occasion. It is no part of this profession's tactics to fling stones at trade. Its charitable cloak must cover all ranks.

The Longstaffes had arrived late; for, in spite of Philomela's urgent persuasion, Apollo had declined to order their fly before half-past nine.

A cornet, a piano, and a violin were discoursing a sweet waltz in some recess when they were announced. The young hostess received them in an ante-room, self-possessed and smiling as she touched the tips of her guests' fingers. Two or three men in the doorway stared at Medea as she made her entry. Her queenly gait and noble figure were not familiar to them. Who could she be? As she passed in front of Mr. McCracken, he gave Rachel a very decided nudge. The host wore a blazing diamond centre-piece in his white

shirt, and for once his red hair was completely subdued by oily fluids.

"Who is she?" he said anxiously, thinking that Medea must be at least some offshoot of aristocracy, as he watched her moving slowly forwards with her head well back and her large eyes uplifted.

Miss Pilkington, in a flutter of pink gauze and dewdrops, looked like a pantomime fairy of some antediluvian date. She was leading round a juvenile officer who had just joined the depôt, while Letty, fresh as a daisy in a white frock, was making the most of her emancipation in the arms of a heavy major, who trod persistently on her toes.

Tom and Dick Ringrose, with a bearded friend, stood not far from Medea, watching the arrivals. The brothers put their heads together, but did not decide her personality. Medea was looking over their heads towards the Proteus party, which was a very

noisy one. These girls went in for good nature and popularity, being heavy and red-cheeked. They were now consulting their programmes with partners in attendance, noisily disputing certain dances. Medea watched these proceedings as a new spectacle. The formality of grand ducal entertainments showed nothing similar to this.

Meanwhile Tom Ringrose cogitated silently. With his glass firmly fixed in his eye, he inspected Miss Longstaffe with approval.

Tall and fair. Very tall, very fair. Yes, of course he liked a woman to be tall and fair. Who was she? So calm, so self-possessed, so indifferent to those who were looking at her.

"Dick, do find out who she is?"

"I've asked the Bedmondstone men, but no one seems to know," said Dick.

Medea stood still watching the ogling

and coquetting going on near her, amusement and distaste alternately on her face.

Tom, who hated the Proteus family cordially, vowed he must be introduced to this girl, who also seemed to disapprove of them. But at this juncture, to his unutterable disgust, Arabella Proteus perceived him and beckoned his approach.

Medea was standing quite solitary against a curtained wall, not seeming to know that there was anything unusual in her partnerless condition.

Apollo, who had taken a couple of turns with Philomela, had now landed her breathless beside Letty Pilkington.

"A dance to spare for me, Letty?" he said carelessly, while his eyes watched Rachel's movements through the doorway opposite.

For a moment, as the music stopped, a tide of outgoing dancers obstructed his view. He noticed as each couple

passed out that a figure standing against the wall arrested the attention of all. People were looking with curiosity or admiration at Medea. He knew that it was admiration when his glance fell upon her.

Her pose was statuesque and beautiful. There were crimson draperies at the back of her, throwing out admirably the curves of her fine neck and shoulders, while the heavy folds of her white silk gown, closely draped about her in graceful lines, revealed the noble proportions of her beautiful form.

"I never knew she was so handsome," reflected Apollo.

It was not long before Mr. McCracken came ambling towards the young lady who had struck his fancy. He was terribly conscious of his pointed patent leather toes, and they were certainly anything but comfortable.

Presently Medea's trailing gown was swept off to the tea-room, and a late set of arrivals arrested Apollo's attention.

The tall and loosely jointed man with a good-natured smile was Lord Wrexham. Upon his arm a stately old lady with an ivory-handled crutch-stick affected to lean. The earl's support was not at all necessary to her. Her snow-white hair was carried up straight over a cushion. She was further remarkable by reason of costly point lace trimming, a pearl-grey brocade, and jewels numerous and dazzling in antique settings. At the first moment Rachel concluded that this was the great Madam Ringrose herself. But presently she perceived another lady shielded behind the pair. Stout and anything but aristocratic appeared the countess in a light blue gown, with deep white fringes attached to it. Her ruddy complexion was not by any means judiciously toned down by this too

glaring costume. Rachel shuddered the next day, recalling this atrocious costume. Still the lady sported the famous Wrexham diamonds, tiara, stomacher and all complete. Her personality could not be mistaken. She spoke in a loud voice as Rachel drew near to her.

"I have taken the liberty, Miss McCracken, of bringing my friend, Miss Dorothea Godbold, who is staying with us." The noble lady addressed her young hostess with the tone of one conferring a favour.

The wonderfully built up old lady, stays, brocade, and backbone of a former century, looked just ready to dance a minuet. She spoke in a high-pitched voice, with an imperious lifting of her well-arched nose. Rachel at once thought of fairy godmothers and their malevolent practices.

"You think I ought to be tucked up in bed at this hour, don't you now, Miss Cracknell? But I made her ladyship bring

me. My wick ain't going out yet, and I like the fun of such fairs. Don't you fear now I want any of your smart young dandies to dance attendance on me, though there was a day when I had half this county glad to polk' with me! I have come here to look out for some young relatives of mine, though I don't feel sure I'll meet 'em in this house. They're not fine enough folks for you, I expect." She turned and sniffed venomously at the wax-lights and banks of hothouse flowers.

What a terrible old woman, thought Rachel, trembling as she met the lightning glance of her eyes. She felt as if her very soul would shrivel up before its shrewdness. At last she found voice to say—

"Can I assist you? What is their name?" Then she suddenly remembered that Miss Pilkington had spoken of Godbold connections with reference to the Longstaffes.

The old lady looked her up and down steadily and observed a sudden flush.

"Oh, it don't signify. Just you go about your business, Miss Cracknell, and I'll find them sure enough if they're here. Maybe they take after that mummy, their father, and I'll be ashamed to acknowledge them. Dorothea Godbold is never in a fix if there's anything disagreeable to face. Lord Wrexham, I'll just sit down a bit. Don't you leave her ladyship too long; she's mortally jealous of me." The old lady chuckled in supreme enjoyment of her joke. Then she turned round and surveyed the stream of dancers now passing through the archway.

Apollo passed with Letty on his arm.

"A pretty pair," said Miss Godbold quite audibly.

Letty blushed and the young man tugged fiercely at his moustache.

"Who is that handsome young man?"

said the countess at the same moment to Rachel. "I thought I knew every one within ten miles by sight."

By-and-by Miss Godbold, apparently tired of her situation, took a solitary march round the half-deserted room. The dancers had flocked out to conservatories and refreshment rooms. The ancient dame appeared to be making steadily for some point of vantage. At last she appeared to have gained the desired goal, and, spreading out her rich train, she took possession of a vacant seat near the conservatory. Here Medea and Philomela were standing together engaged in an animated conversation of finger language.

CHAPTER XI.

PAST OUR DANCING DAYS.

"Oh, fie, Sir Bruce! After all your pretty promises you have played me false. Where have you been hiding since dinner-time?"

Rachel's honoured guest had sauntered listlessly across the ante-room and was standing looking on at the dancers when Rachel caught sight of him. He bowed with mock humility and contrition. Rachel had been talking in an animated way to Tom Ringrose, a way highly displeasing to Lady Wrexham, who had come hither partly to defeat her little hostess in her manœuvring tactics. It did not seem so easy, however. Miss McCracken was in

reality only giving an amusing version of Miss Godbold's entry. Still to her ladyship it looked like flirtation. The most innocent discourse on Rachel's part took the colour of coquetry. She had such a reprehensible trick of dropping and lifting her eyes while she sniffed at her bouquet or toyed with her fan.

"Fair lady, forgive your humble slave. To pay for my kid gloves I have been engaged since dinner-time upon a magazine article. I hope my statistics have not gone astray beneath the seductive influence of Strauss. The strains were irresistible, and here I am. You have kept some dances for me, I hope?—Hullo, Ringrose! Well met, old fellow. I had meant to look you up one day, only I heard you were coming here to-night."

Tom's manner did not demonstrate any great warmth in answer.

Said Rachel, running her pencil down

her card, "But you don't deserve a dance, Sir Bruce."

"Don't you know, Miss McCracken, that there are some poor beggars who get more than they deserve. For instance, I have always received more kicks than halfpence in this cruel world. For once let the balance be in my favour, and let me have a dance to-night. Now don't hurl me into an abyss of despair by those eloquent eyebrows."

Rachel and her guest were on very easy terms together. They each assumed a sparring attitude at times, and the light raillery of their habitual converse had a certain amount of seriousness beneath the surface. Occasionally she hit Sir Bruce, and occasionally he hit her of intention, but neither winced beneath a well-aimed blow.

To Tom Ringrose it all appeared coquetry, and he felt that he could not

approve of the young lady's playful familiarity. This young man had become very precise in his code of womanly propriety since the days of Miss Leonora's victory.

"Sir Bruce is always finding fault with my eyebrows, Mr. Ringrose," said Rachel, assuming pettishness and arching them more prettily than before.

"How can you say so, Miss McCracken, when I offered to write a sonnet to them?"

Rachel cast a swift glance of inquiry at the man's imperturbable face, and then heaved a little sigh.

"I didn't even know what a sonnet was till I looked in the dictionary. I thought you were making fun of me. Now are you going to be kind enough to do some duty dances? If I stay any longer with you Miss Pilkington will say I am flirting."

All the time Sir Bruce talked his eyes

travelled round the room. That quiet glance was very comprehensive.

"You must be merciful, Miss McCracken. I am really past my dancing days," he said.

"I am at your service," said Tom Ringrose more affably. He had an introduction to Medea in view.

"Like a lamb to the slaughter! Oh, you good boy. Sir Bruce, have you asked Sophia Wilson to dance with you?"

He shook his head with the most positive negation.

"Well, she is getting on very well with the army at present, so I will let you off. Major Howe seems deeply interested in the clothing of her Zogobad converts. She has dressed them in shirts, and her mission is now to supply them with collars. I see your cousin, Miss Proteus, looking towards you. She has asked twice where you were."

Sir Bruce displayed a languid interest. "Where? Describe her to me."

"That girl in red, dancing with a man with a camellia as big as a peony, is Arabella Proteus. The man is Captain Wye. I call him and Major Howe the notes of interrogation. Do look how their heads bend over their partners."

Sir Bruce laughed, but Tom Ringrose moved off with an air of disgust. She was very flippant. He hated such pertness and levity, he said to himself.

"I would not be introduced to that scarlet woman if she was my cousin ten times over," said the baronet with melodramatic accent as Captain Wye toiled past with his weighty burden. "What a form! What feet! I declare she has frightened Ringrose away."

Rachel bit at the tassel of her fan. "Is there no one here you admire?" she said, with her pettish frown.

He laughed and looked at her, saying, "The greater light puts out the lesser."

"Do you mean that for a compliment? I like pretty speeches to be very plain. I am so stupid, you know."

"Stupid—by Jove! no," he said quickly.

It was not quite a pleasant speech to Rachel's ears. She would prefer that he should think her stupid.

"I am sorry, then, to tell you that the greater light is going away from you. You had better come and borrow the moon's or some little star's. Shall I present you to youth, beauty, or talent?"

This was a show young man, and Rachel thought it was time he was seen.

"Does youth mean a daisy, smelling of bread-and-butter and prattling of her doll? As to provincial beauty, it gives itself airs, and generally doesn't talk at all; and talent, I can assure you, always strikes me

dumb. I can't revolve as a satellite to any sweet girl graduate."

"Then come with me, and I will introduce you to a girl utterly unlike any one I have ever met before."

He offered his arm, and she guided his steps towards the conservatory doors. He murmured as he went, with mocking laughter—

"Originality is charming, no doubt; but do have mercy, fair lady. Say it is not an eccentric spinster in a straight gown with short hair and spectacles, or a strong-minded Diana who will ask me to place the winners for next year's races, or a shy nymph who blushes at her own voice, or a widow, or a young lady who is engaged or has met with a disappointment——"

Medea had not observed a couple advancing towards her, for her head was bent down as she gave attention to Philomela's finger language. She held the

dumb girl's ivory tablets while she signed in an animated way. The old lady, who had taken a seat near this pair, had been surveying them for some time with evident curiosity.

"Miss Longstaffe, are you engaged for the next dance? Let me introduce Sir Bruce Onslow to you."

As Medea raised her head Philomela's pretty ornamental tablets fell to the ground. Rachel's companion quickly stooped to pick them up. As he presented them to Medea he looked at her steadily. It was a full calm gaze, and it almost seemed to Rachel that there was something like a warning in it. Medea's lips were parted, and her lovely eyes wide open with something that looked like fear.

"Miss Longstaffe and I are not strangers, after all, Miss McCracken. We have met before in Hornhausen. But this is a very unexpected pleasure."

He laid deliberate stress on his last words. The explanation of unexpectedness was almost too marked. It sounded like an exoneration.

"Ah, then," said Rachel, "I need not trouble about you any more. You will know what to talk about."

She left the pair, looking over her shoulder and nodding to them as she moved away. Her head was full of speculation. On what terms had these two been previously?

Miss Longstaffe's sudden confusion seemed to declare that their intercourse had not been without a serious side. There had, perhaps, been love passages between these two. Rachel knew Sir Bruce well enough by this time to be aware that he liked to amuse himself, and that the society of women was necessary to him. She was not quite pleased at this moment to realize the baronet's intimacy with such a beautiful

woman as Medea Longstaffe. Moreover, it was more than likely that this intimacy had been carried beyond the lengths of flirtation. She could not dismiss at once from her mind the strange mingling of despair and anger which she had seen in Medea's eyes.

When Rachel came back to the anteroom, Tom Ringrose was still hanging about the doorway in moody discontent. Miss McCracken had introduced that fellow Onslow to the lady of his choice, and he would certainly be cut out for the evening. Rachel's eye lighting upon him, she perceived that something had gone amiss, and set herself the task of restoring him to good temper. Observing Lady Wrexham's glance fixed upon her movements, she exhausted herself in her efforts to please. The countess felt it incumbent on her to cross the room without her husband and interrupt the conversation.

"They are gone into the conservatory now, Mr. Ringrose, but I will introduce you to her after this dance," was all that her ears picked up.

There was a short pause between Medea and Sir Bruce when Rachel went away from them—such a pause as a newly introduced couple never admits. Here there were threads to take up as dangerous as electric wires.

"This is really a great surprise to me," said the man at last in a low tone, seeing she would not or could not speak.

There was a very unusual thrill of uncertainty and want of ease about his tone. Observant as he was generally, he failed now to take notice of an old lady who sat within earshot. Her face was turned to the dancers, and her head nodded time to the music. How could he know that she was interested to hear what he had got to say?

Medea traced some letters mechanically on Phil's tablets restored to her grasp. "Surprise, surprise," was all the pencil would effect.

Neither looked directly at the other. Medea's eyes were lowered completely, while Sir Bruce's glance rested on the amethyst cross, which rose and fell so quickly on her white breast. At last the girl answered. There was no clear decision now in her tones. Her words came slowly and as if muffled by the suffocating beating of her heart.

"A great surprise to me, too."

Then he said with a sort of resentful impatience—

"Why should I not come here?"

"No, there is no reason why you should not; only——"

"Only what?" he said quickly, raising his eyes to her face.

She at the same instant raised hers and

met his glance. Looking down into those clear deeps, so troubled, so very sorrowful, he drew himself a little away. He felt the unspoken reproach in a way that was disagreeable to him. Medea gained a little resolution as she looked at him.

"Only—we had agreed—to part," she said.

He shrugged his shoulders, a foreign trick that seemed natural to him.

"No man can be answerable for destiny. This is a chance meeting. You do not believe me, you suspect me of having planned it. I swear on my honour I had no idea I should meet you."

Now she looked straight before her. "Can it really be so? And this world is so wide. Then I think fate is very cruel to me." There was a sound like a sob in her throat as her last words dropped from her. They were quite clear and distinct.

At this moment the old lady in brocade

turned and looked at the pair in a very casual way. Miss Dorothea Godbold saw nothing unusual or tragic in the aspect or attitude of the two people conversing near to her. No emotional words passing between them were betrayed by signs or looks. They were both perfectly quiet, perfectly well-bred. It is true the man stood very near to his companion, dropping his words almost into her ear. But she appeared to be listening without any excitement as she twisted the ivory tablets in her hand.

"It is you that are cruel, Medea. You went away from Hornhausen without leaving any address for me. And now, after all that has passed, you do not even care to see me."

She gave a slight start. "Care? How can I now? It is all past. I am only afraid."

"Afraid? Of me?"

Perhaps the notion half pleased him, for

his eyes were fixed upon her while he smiled. She stirred again, inclining further from him.

"Oh no, no! It is only myself I have to fear."

Again he smiled with a look which appeared like triumph.

"You take all things in life too seriously, Medea. You exaggerate things absurdly. You are vindictive now towards me. What for?"

"I vindictive? Oh no! How can I be? The mistake was mine."

She spoke with a heavenly meekness, her voice breaking a little. It might have disarmed cruelty. Sir Bruce was not inhuman by any means, but the voice did not disarm him.

"Tell me, then, that we are friends. Surely we can always be such. Why should we quarrel? There is no reason why we should not meet and be on good

terms because——" He bent nearer to her and dropped his voice. Miss Dorothea strained her ears in vain. The next murmur of the melodious voice, a voice which seemed to match the man's dark southern face, she caught distinctly: "Now let us dance. It seems so long since I danced with you."

He was longing to touch her, to hold her in his arms once more. Yet this was not the Medea he had known formerly, the ardent, loving woman whose whole soul had been transparent to him. These cold and distant manners were not familiar to him. Only the beautiful face and form were the same, animated now by a spirit of resistance which provoked his love far more keenly than a gentle yielding.

"No—no, I cannot dance. There is my sister here, whom I cannot leave."

Medea seized the nearest excuse with fierce energy. Philomela, sitting near at

hand on a bench, was quite happy watching the spectacle, which was so novel to her. She had been speculating quietly who Medea's friend could be. He was very handsome, she thought—quite as handsome as Apollo, only in a different way.

A skinny old hand, with mittens and many dazzling rings upon it, laid itself upon Medea's arm. She turned her eyes upon the old lady, who at the same instant bowed in a formal way to Sir Bruce.

"Miss Godbold, you here! Upon my word, this is the most extraordinary house for unexpected meetings. This young lady and I parted at a German court without any idea of meeting in England."

Sir Bruce did not quite conceal his embarrassment. He was uneasy beneath the cool stare. Had she heard anything? She was icily courteous in her demeanour; but he knew her well enough to distrust her civility.

"Indeed! Ah, by-the-by, I did hear some time back from Susan Onslow that you were playing on all manner of strings over in Hornhausen—fiddle strings, heart strings, and so on. Any of 'em broken, do you think? My dear, I was going to say to you that I will look after your sister if you are going to dance. Sir Bruce will at least warrant me respectable. Here, give me those tablets. You are Medea Longstaffe, I know. Good Lord, what a name for a Godbold. I used to cut bread-and-butter for your foolish mother years before you were born. There, go away. Why do you look so grave? Your big eyes frighten me." Then, turning her back on the pair she had fairly startled, she nodded amicably to Philomela, and opened fire on the tablets.

Dumb people know nothing of shyness. Self-consciousness belongs to the completer organizations. Before Medea returned to

her Miss Phil was in a fever of excitement over the revelations of Miss Godbold concerning her family.

Medea, passing down the room on a partner's arm, attracted more attention than before. There was a rare colour on her cheek, and a flash of more than ordinary brilliance in her eyes. They were an admirably matched couple in height and looks. Many remarked them, and Rachel sang a little voiceless thanksgiving.

"I must go away—I cannot dance," said Medea in a broken voice after a couple of turns.

The man led her out into the conservatory, and, finding a low chair, drew it into a secluded corner. His movements were all swift and noiseless. Taking her fan from her unresisting hand, he gently fluttered it to and fro, standing over her. There was a curious expression on his face. His eyes were full of light and softness,

but the line of his lips closed tightly. The brilliant illuminations in the ball-room trembled dimly through the leaves of palms and camellias upon Medea's face.

"Medea," came at last in a low voice from the man. The fan ceased to wave. She lifted her head and essayed to steady her glance. Those fearless eyes fell once again. "My darling, it seems so long since we met, since we were alone together; beloved, how beautiful you are."

There was a tremble in his words that could not be feigned. She shook her head and turned her face from him.

"I—I cannot bear any more of this. We parted—we said a last good-bye. Oh, you are worse than cruel to begin it all again. Is there never to be any forgetfulness for me? What have I done—what have I done to suffer so?" As she turned round away from him she rested her head against the chair-back.

He could not see her face; but he saw her agitation, though he did not understand the reason of it. He thought it was the agitation of a love revived.

"Have I not told you I never dreamt of seeing you here? As far as I knew, you were still abroad. When I went back to Hornhausen they said you had gone to Hanover. Your English home I never knew. It was the merest chance that brought me here on a visit. But I believe in destiny, and I always yield to it." Medea trembled visibly as he went on. The musical intonations of his voice vibrated clearly in spite of the loud instruments near at hand. "I never knew how dear you were to me till I had given you up. Medea, say that you love me still."

She stood up suddenly and faced him. "Why should I say it? It would not be true now," she cried passionately. Then suddenly she threw up her hands with a

gesture most despairing, and hid her face in them.

He did not dare to touch her, but he approached his face more nearly. She could feel his breath as he spoke.

"What have I done to merit this? Your love was a poor thing not to survive a summer's day." She shuddered from head to foot. "You did not shrink from me in other times." Then his eye fell upon the bangle upon her uplifted arm. "You have changed, indeed, and your conscience has become more tender since we parted."

Just the faintest inflection of a sneer was perceptible in his last words. It was enough. It fired the charge. Her control broke down. With all her meekness, her self-abasement gone, with a sudden storm of indignation rending her, Medea spoke.

"No. You are right; it was not always so. I did not shrink from you, because I did not know that you were a bold bad

man. Everything is changed now between us, and will be for evermore. Truly, the scales have fallen from my eyes. Do you remember that you once called me the innocent sorceress? I am not innocent any longer. I know you guilty of cruelty and falseness to me. I know you as you are, and understanding your power over women, I am afraid."

He plucked absently at the fern plants, but there was still a smile on his lips. These reproaches were but a little flame of anger which would presently burn out. She went on—

"What have you done to merit my contempt? Shall I remind you that you courted me, making love to me openly in the sight of my friends; for abroad no one could understand I was not your equal. I am clever, people say; I have many gifts, and we have tastes in common. It seemed so natural to the onlookers that

we should love each other; so they threw us together in every way. Is it not true that you professed, when we first met, to be proud to win my notice and appreciation of your talents? At last you made me love you—yet not easily, I think. Then, but a few days after you had won me, when you knew that I would have laid down my life for your sake, you wearied of me. The game was played out for you. The sweet illusion lasted but a little time for me, and then my hopes and faith made fatal shipwreck."

Medea did not weep, but hard, spasmodic sobs divided her speech now and again. She made a pause now, and her voice gained in firmness when she went on.

"You came and told me, even with soft endearments, that it had all been an idle dream, the recollection of which would be pleasant to the end of our days, but that I must not hope for the ordinary prosaic

end of marriage!" How scornfully her voice rang out in distinctly syllabled words. "You were a poor man, you said, and you were therefore compelled to marry, if you married at all, a woman with means; otherwise you would require to forfeit all comfort and refinement and give up a life of ease. You weighed me in the balance with your own selfishness, and the scale of a woman's love flew up. Oh, need I to repeat it all? Yes, yes, I will say it all again, for your words are graven on my heart, and you may have forgotten."

Sir Bruce made no effort to interrupt. He only fluttered the fan to and fro in a careless way.

"Your family, you told me, Sir Bruce, was old and proud, and mine, you hinted, was of a more humble station. You were an honourable man, you said, who scorned to raise false hopes. You were acting a fair part in telling me you could never

marry me. I must prove myself what you had always esteemed me—a sensible woman. I had always been kind to you; I might be gracious and friendly still. You meant that I should be your toy, a thing to caress, a heart to sound as long as you remained at Hornhausen. Why could I not enjoy life and the good things it offered me?—one of the good things, your approval of my talents and looks; another, what you called your *love* for me."

It was very strange to hear Medea's voice so strong in scorn. The clear resonance of her contemptuous utterance seemed to cut all sophistry sharply. This simple, placable creature was roused to a fierce and righteous anger.

The smile had now faded from Sir Bruce's face, but he held his peace. He seemed inclined to let Medea exhaust herself.

"I knew nothing of flirts. I had never guessed how cruelly a man can play with a woman's heart. Perhaps it flattered your vanity, your self-love, to think how much I loved you. I was no young school-girl, impressionable and easily won. My thoughts were never given to love, and from my girlhood I had built no future for myself in marriage. I had always worked hard, and while I worked I seemed sexless. But idle days visited me, and you came in my way, and by every device that a man experienced in women's hearts knows you tried to make me love you. And —and at last I did." Medea shivered. "You call yourself sensitive. Some say you are a poet, and that it belongs to a sentimental nature to change its worship at every shrine. Oh God! to think of the misery that shallow-souled, light-hearted men such as you are work to scores of women. Truly I understand you now, and

know that you are not worthy of any good woman's love."

Medea's eyes mirrored her mingled anguish and wrath as they were raised upwards. She needed no support now, but stood erect and strong. When she resumed she turned her face away from the man who stood so unmoved beneath the storm of accusation. Her voice was less contemptuous, almost pathetic.

"Almost I can pity you. I thank God there is something in me unchangeable. Yet it is not to you that my heart is true, but to what I thought you were. My constancy is not a loyalty to what is false, to a real Bruce Onslow, but to the man I thought he was, to the hero I exalted as a god. It has always been so with me. When I was a child I idealized my father, and it seemed that some greatness in him exacted from me earnest study and effort. And because I exalted you, and believed

in your love, an absolute surrender and devotion was demanded of me in return. You are right. Life is altogether serious to me. I cannot look at it with half-shut eyes, or give of the fullness of my heart with one hand."

The music had now ceased, and the dancers drifted in pairs into the cooler atmosphere of the conservatory; but they did not penetrate the shady recess where Medea's white form was outlined against dark camellia foliage. At the ceasing of the music she turned to go. Over her shoulder she spoke more hurriedly—

"Do not follow me now. We said good-bye before, and I went away from Hornhausen believing we should never meet again. If you persist in offering me your friendship now you will compel me to go away again. My love is quite dead, but there never can be friendship between us."

At this moment Miss McCracken and Tom Ringrose appeared close at hand. They were evidently in search of some one.

"Ah, by Jove!" said the young man, "there's Miss Longstaffe. Looks like a statue amongst the trees—a wood nymph —what do you call 'em?—naiads." Rachel did not correct. "Introduce me now, Miss McCracken. Who's the man there? I can't see in this owls' light."

Rachel made a pretence of uncertainty. "Why, I believe it is Sir Bruce."

Tom fixed his eyeglass securely. "Ah, yes, no doubt. He's at his old games again."

The music presently struck up to a change of partners. Tom Ringrose was well satisfied to walk off with his dryad on his arm. Rachel of course dropped into the vacant chair near Sir Bruce. He still retained Medea's fan. By-and-by he

would make it a pretext for speaking to her again.

"What a nice quiet corner," remarked Miss McCracken, glancing obliquely at her neighbour. "But why don't you dance?"

"I think I told you my dancing days were done." He was suffering from an irritation he dared not show.

"Was it in Germany that you last met Miss Longstaffe?" said Rachel, rushing fearlessly at her point. She knew it was vain to beat about the bush with Sir Bruce, and that her courage had more than once forced his admiration. A diplomatic man of the world often has a great respect for a daring he cannot emulate. In a general way, if we do not esteem more highly we laud most vigorously the talents and virtues which we cannot lay claim to. Sir Bruce slowly turned his face towards his young hostess. She went on undauntedly, for a moment

casting down her eyes. "You were quarrelling just now. I heard her say there could never be any friendship between you."

He looked at her with the same unchanging aspect as before. His voice was lazily indifferent, and there was not a trace of annoyance about his manner.

"Pray don't be alarmed concerning my politeness. I have no doubt Miss Longstaffe and I will be very good friends tomorrow. She—is—slightly impetuous at times, and we were discussing a subject she is very warm about. Did you hear any more of our conversation that was interesting to you, Miss McCracken?" Rachel coloured palpably for once. "Yes," he resumed, "Miss Longstaffe and I met frequently at the court of Hornhausen. She was companion to the Grand Duke's sister. You have heard her play, of course? She is a divine musician. They took a good

deal of notice of her over there on that account. She is very accomplished in many ways."

Rachel stared meditatively at a Chinese lantern over the man's head.

"Ah, yes, I see—duets and so on. Very pleasant, no doubt." After a moment's pause she added, as if quite irrelative, "Miss Longstaffe is handsome."

"Some people say so."

"But don't you think so?"

"I admire all your sex," he said, with a light laugh.

"I shall cultivate her acquaintance, since you praise her talents so highly."

There was a trace of patronage in the young lady's tone. Sir Bruce shrugged his shoulders.

"It will be with profit, no doubt. You have a charming knack of profiting by all you see and hear, Miss McCracken. Miss Longstaffe is, however, a very transparent

person, and no doubt you will soon fathom her mind. Here comes a young Adonis to claim you."

To Rachel's ears there was a decided tone of relief in her companion's voice.

"It is Miss Longstaffe's brother," she said quickly. She was repaid by seeing a swift look of surprise directed from Sir Bruce towards her partner.

"This is the extra you promised me, and it is half over," said Apollo, bowing low, but with decided reproach in his frank blue eyes.

BOOK THE THIRD.

CHAPTER I.

REMINISCENCES.

It has been written that "the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history."

Certainly if Medea Longstaffe's spirit had been devoid of enthusiasms and faith, all her days would have been placid, and her life free from the endeavours and longings which bring sorrow in their train. But her great heart, beating high with ardent yearnings and strong beliefs, made continual shipwreck of its affections, and was again and again wounded sorely. Alas! for this single-minded creature, who was ever so fatally in earnest, her rare sin-

cerity was utterly opposed to any long, lasting felicity. Misunderstandings, and the faithlessness of everyday hearts, met her everywhere.

As a matter of course, where such an one loved, she idealized the object beloved, and the destruction or sapping of her beliefs toppled down a magnificent edifice of dreams. She had frittered away nothing of feeling or emotion in her early girlhood. No passing fancies or sentimental cravings had weakened the strength of her strong passions. She had never had leisure or inclination for idle flirtings. All the make-believes of love, preliminary canters, so to speak, incidents such as occur in the lives of most girls, she was ignorant of. Everything was real to her. Practice, before the real game was played, she had never dreamt of. How or why should men and women feign what they did not feel?

Amongst the wise young serpents of her times, Medea stood a foolish virgin. For not to be as other women are, surely argues sublime virtue or folly.

Thus it was that the force of a first love, coming to her in her full womanhood, was overwhelming. The great tide of passion had not been lessened by any little gradual waves of feeling, and the deep waters went over her soul.

Then when the glory of her happiness departed, the shame of knowing that she had worshipped a false god, that she had given a holy love to a trifler, crushed her with intolerable anguish.

She had drawn nigh to what she believed a sacred altar, to what seemed to her a shrine of all sanctity, and had there laid the precious treasure of love in awe and trembling, offering it up with inexpressible yearnings and prayers. And a reckless hand, without reverence or gratitude, had

taken up this love, had despised it, and tossed it carelessly aside as a thing worthless and unavailing.

Then the self-tormenting faculty which exists in every true woman's heart rose up rampant beneath the conditions in which she was placed. She had given her heart too easily; she had humbled herself in the self-abandonment of a supreme love. She was laden with remorse and wounded pride, and there was no balm for her in the circumstances surrounding her. She must cover up the wound as best she could, and give no sign of her sharp anguish. Her whole soul was sick and faint, and there was none to support or comfort her. She might not even think of the man she had loved without shame and abasement. His tender looks, his smiles, his praise came back to her memory only to carry reproach with them.

He had kissed her. She trembled, and

the rare colour would rise on her pale face in the solitude of her chamber when she recalled it all. That long summer afternoon in the forest—ah, how sweet the prologue had been!—was now to her a recollection of sorrow, if not disgrace.

My latitudinarian lady readers, I pray you not to smile at that strong term. It is a pother about a kiss, no doubt! On a summer holiday what more natural, given a handsome girl and a susceptible young man, than that lips too nearly approached should meet? Ah, well, I know, of course, you read our modern romances, and are thrilled by details of "hungry kisses" and rapturous embraces. You come to look on these things lightly, to take as a matter of course such seals of affection. But the pure holiness of Medea's lips had never been touched by the light breath of any careless temporary lover. She knew

nothing of the tales of modern chivalry so called.

Certainly her experience of masculine weaknesses and inclinations was limited, and I give you liberty to call her a prude. Otherwise, would she have perplexed herself about that innocent proceeding? The contact of two curves, what is it? Medea could discourse on convexity in a satisfactory way. The laws of geometry were clear to her intelligence; but the laws which guide or govern human attractions were an unwritten matter, concerning which she had had no teaching.

She wondered vaguely, did such things happen to other women? How did they bear them? In vain did Medea, in her trouble, fly to her old resources. Her pursuits were unavailing; the fountains no longer sent forth sweet waters. A poisonous love had tainted even divine philosophy.

It was true her worthless lover had gone away from her, and the shame of her love might be forgotten. But the recollection of happier days of ignorance, with the final disgrace of disillusion, could not be annihilated. These mingled with everything, and made all bitter. She had built the houses for her soul to dwell in upon shifting sands. There was no consolation in art and learning when her heart was stricken. She had made to herself false gods, and when trouble and anguish had come upon her these were powerless to help.

This passionate creature, strung to deepest misery as to highest bliss, with a heart whose compass was broad and wide for the sorrows of others, had, in the hour of her distress, none to turn to. Alone, without human sympathy, she stood face to face with a wrecked love. The revival of it all at this time, by the reappearance of Sir

Bruce, was a cruel blow. The worst pain had seemed over after long communing with her own heart. Now this man, once her lover, had stepped across her path again, and all numbed recollections were revived. Had he come to shame her here?

She did not love him any longer. But she had loved him—ah, how well! When she touched the gold band upon her arm she shivered. How short a time ago it seemed! how well she remembered it all!

Why had she let it remain there so long? He had clasped it that day—that never-to-be-forgotten day in the forest—about her arm, with foolish, fond words of love and admiration. And she, not knowing the trick of the clasp, had never been able to remove it. Again and again she had been on the point of going to some jeweller's, and of having it undone; but her courage had always failed her. It was so

difficult to escape remark in those small towns where she had dwelt. When she had left Hornhausen she had gone away to the country residence of a friend in remote Prussia. Thence she had been summoned home.

The morning after the ball broke clear and bright, with indications of frost. Philomela and Apollo welcomed the daylight in blithe mood. It was only Medea who turned and buried her face in the pillows when the earliest sun-rays danced across the floor. Another day! Ah, what might it not bring forth for her —what dire possibilities of reproach and shame! For her mind dwelt with morbid persistence upon the love which she had given, and which had been rejected.

There was the usual round of meals and customary chatter to get through. How could she bear the trivial talk, the questionings and comments that would be

directed towards her? For the friend from Hornhausen, who had turned up in such an unexpected way, would certainly be discussed, and his merits of appearance and manner commented upon. This poor, unheroic heroine shrank before the ordeal of family curiosity. She had said to her mother last night she was not ashamed, but this morning, with the dawn, a great revulsion of confusion and remorse set in. She could never undo it. There was the bitterness of it all!

And having met him once more, under other circumstances, and seeing it all in the clear light of retrospection, she shrank at the recollection of her own blind folly. It seemed to her that something of womanly modesty and purity must have left her, since she had loved one so unworthy.

All this seems impossible, improbable, to you, my friends. I allow this exaggerated

sensitiveness is exceptional and peculiar, nevertheless it is true in this unconventional instance of womanhood.

Medea now dreaded that Sir Bruce might not leave her alone here, that he might persecute her with attentions and seek to revive past feelings.

The doctor had already gone out on his rounds when the young people came down to breakfast. At ten o'clock Medea found Philomela in the dining-room. She had breakfasted, and was setting down the dishes in the fender to keep warm. It was with a feeling of relief that she saw Apollo was not present. With Philomela conversation was not so urgent. The dumb girl remained kneeling on the hearthrug, signing with animation to her mother, who knitted away vigorously at the doctor's socks. When Medea's cold lips touched Mrs. Morgan's cheek, the mother made no answering demonstration, only casting a

furtive glance at her daughter after she had taken a seat at the table.

Medea wore her ordinary simple black dress. She was very pale—paler than any dissipation warranted—and the lustre of her beautiful eyes was dimmed. They were heavy and languid—with fatigue, it might be, or was it with weeping?

It is sadly true that Mrs. Morgan's susceptibilities had diminished of late years. Her remorseful tendencies were no longer so acute, and her conscience appeared to have gone to sleep.

No one ill-used or blamed Charlotte in these days, and so there was no need for a contrite heart. The tender love and consideration which surrounded her, instead of inculcating gratitude and a corresponding amount of consideration for others, helped to set her on a pinnacle of superiority. Prosperity had not had a softening influence on Charlotte's heart.

But on the preceding evening, after the departure of the young folks, the good doctor had taken his wife to task in a mild way. In consequence of his remarks, certain feeble compunctions had visited her in the night hours, though a nascent jealousy of Dr. Morgan's interference began to make itself felt. The aspect of Medea's face this morning revived the weak maternal regrets. With an effort to bridge over the past night's unkindness, Charlotte addressed her daughter in conciliatory tones.

"Phil has been telling me about Aunt Dorothea. What a singular thing that you should meet her at a ball! I don't believe she has ever been in this part of the county before, though Lakenham is in the Godbold gift. I suppose the Wrexhams are new friends. And I hear she is coming to see me to-day. How very tiresome on baking-day!"

Mrs. Morgan was secretly aggrieved at the prospect of patronage. And so many years had elapsed since any overtures of friendship were made to her, that she had acquired the habit of regarding herself as an injured party where her relatives were concerned.

"It's rather late in her life to be looking up her poor relations, and I'm sure I don't want to be taken up by grand people. I'm thankful to say I've got a husband who keeps me in comfort, and there's no need for me or mine to be patronized."

Mrs. Morgan here recalled the galling fact that Medea had accepted payment for her services with the foreign countess. She jerked her knitting and dropped half a dozen stitches, going on hurriedly—

"And she's actually staying at Ellesmore Lodge. Dear, dear! only to think of it!"

The venerable lady had on the previous

evening made herself known to her young relatives in turn. Great had been Miss Rachel's satisfaction to learn that the insignificant guests she had introduced were respectably, or honourably, connected with an old county family. When Apollo Longstaffe, in the pauses of a dance, looked towards Miss Godbold, saying, "Queer old girl, isn't she? Says she's my mother's aunt. Looks a sort of she major-general. Lord, how the subs would quake before that eye!" Miss McCracken smiled sweetly on her partner.

"You are not very respectful towards your relations. Perhaps you've got too many. I had no idea you were connected with the Godbolds."

Rachel's voice expressed an agreeable surprise. Possibly Apollo was not aware of it, for he answered with careless indifference—

"Many relations? I should rather think

so! There are shoals of Godbolds all over the world. There's three or four of my cousins in the service. Perhaps you know young Maurice? He's in the Guards—no end of a swell, though he hardly comes up to my shoulder. Bless my life, he'll hardly say 'How do you do?' to a liner!"

On this day succeeding the ball Charlotte prepared herself to receive her august relative with a certain disagreeable tremor of expectation. She made herself ready in her Sunday best with an irritated sense of the annoyance put upon her by an unexpected visit. Dinner had necessarily been half an hour earlier, and Apollo had grumbled at the alteration which brought his breakfast so near to the midday meal. It was highly disagreeable to Mrs. Morgan to put on her best black silk on a week-day. Those tiresome gimp trimmings with the fringes would catch in everything. Miss Philomela, presiding

at her mother's toilet, prohibited the protection of an apron with vehement signs of negation. Last of all, the luckless Charlotte was constrained to take out Nicholas's cameo brooch, wherewith to pin her collar. No choice remained to her, for in her flustered state the pin of her everyday gold brooch broke off in her hand. In these days the memorial drawer, of which you have already had a glimpse, was seldom unlocked. When it was necessary to investigate its contents Charlotte was irritable. In the long-past years of renunciatory penance the stings therein hidden from sight had not been so bitter. Nowadays a crumpled rose-leaf was enough to upset this little lady's equanimity.

She was unsettled and angry about Miss Godbold's prospective visit. Her presence would recall much of that past which Mrs. Morgan had intentionally con-

signed to oblivion. The waters of Lethe had been turned lavishly upon former events for years, and now that blessed stream was going to be cut off for half an hour, and Mrs. Morgan groaned in spirit. The turning off would expose some unpleasant matters which she did not care to face. Old friends and relatives have an unpleasant way of remembering the facts of our youth—the disagreeable facts, in the main.

In Charlotte's case there was a good deal of awkwardness to be got over, and she had no mind to be forgiven for past delinquencies. She was not the meek and down-trodden soul she had once been. Aunt Dorothea had, in years gone by, strenuously opposed the match with Nicholas, and was not likely to forget that it had been a failure, or forego disagreeable comments. She had, at the time, offered much unpalatable advice, and

would, no doubt, recall the bitter flavouring of wholesome truth.

It was really most annoying that her peace should now be disturbed by the appearance of this old lady! It was all very well for John to hint at advantages to be gained for her children by a friendly deportment towards her rich relative. She wasn't going to toady any one for what they might have got to give. She never was one to fawn on any one or to eat humble-pie! (Oh, Charlotte; have you forgotten your former experience?) It was very fine for John to preach civility. He couldn't have *his* past life set before him and picked to pieces.

Indeed, it was enough to ruffle any woman's temper to have the expectation of such a visit, and the fears of long-forgotten antecedents being raked up. Old folks' memories are alarming telescopes for things a long way off, as we have all had experience.

Shortly before three o'clock, the hour of the expected visit, Mrs. Morgan bustled into the drawing-room, with a perfumed handkerchief and an embroidery satchel in her hand. She took up her position near the fire, in an attitude of stately dignity totally at variance with comfort. Of course she was equal to the occasion, though she much preferred the cosy snugness of the dining-room and her particular easy-chair. Here there were draughts from the windows, and a cheerless white-and-gold paper with summer landscapes upon the walls. These were the work of Nicholas's hand, transported from Woodbine Cottage; though, as Mrs. Jagger had remarked, "It do seem a insult to the doctor to be a bringing of number one's fiddle-faddles into this house."

Certainly Charlotte, judging by her appearance on this day, intended to do her duty by the Godbold family.

"Shut the passage door, Medie," she said sternly; "there's Mrs. Jaggers frying onions, I'm sure. I suppose the doctor has ordered them again. What will your aunt think of such a smell?"

Medea stood near the piano, diligently sorting some wools for her mother. Philomela was still upstairs, curling her hair round a slate pencil heated in a candle. This was an experiment counselled by Letty Pilkington, who made many sacrifices at the altar of vanity. But Philomela was not an apt pupil.

"I shouldn't think, mother, that Aunt Dorothea is very particular about such things," rejoined Medea, as she came back from her little expedition.

"And pray what do you know about her tastes and character? Didn't I live with her before you were born, and don't I know her to be the most exacting, domineering, sarcastic old woman that ever breathed?"

At this moment Charlotte happened to glance through the window. She perceived the approach of an antiquated chariot with a good deal of glass about it. It bore the Wrexham arms, emblazoned after the ostentatious fashion of our grandfathers, and drew up on the Green opposite the doctor's modest wicket-gate. A straight walk led up to the house between shrubs.

Mrs. Morgan, who had been secretly trembling lest the countess should accompany her guest, gave a sigh of relief as she saw Miss Dorothea descend alone and the chariot drive off.

The old lady halted and looked about her as she progressed up the narrow path. She turned up the soil with her walking-stick, looked critically at snowdrops and a brave clump of Christmas roses—Philomela's chief pride at present—and, finally, lifted a discerning eye to the substantial red-brick house.

When she was ushered in by Mary Ann Allnut, Charlotte rose, blushing like a girl beneath their scrutiny.

"Upon my soul, Charlotte, you are much better-looking than in years gone by! Quite a pretty woman, I declare! You used to be a drab sort of girl, with nothing of a figure. Family anxieties don't seem to have weighed on you. You've had the decency to produce a handsome set of children, I'm glad to see. I was always given to understand that Mr. Longstaffe was a remarkably plain man. They take after the Godbolds, of course; though, for that matter, the present generation are a poor lot. That little dandy whipper-snapper Maurice is as ugly as sin, and only up to my shoulder. A pretty one to be the head of the family!"

Charlotte submitted to be patted approvingly on the back, and to receive a kiss

without manifesting any resentment at the first allusion to Nicholas.

"Come here, Medea, child—how that name sticks in my throat!—I want to look at you by daylight. I'm no believer in evening complexions. I've been deceived by tallow and bile often enough. Tired, I suppose? Too many smart young men dangling about you last night." The old lady, who was as tall as Medea herself, lifted the girl's chin, turning her face to the light. "Ah, you didn't sleep, I see! A busy brain and too much heart."

Then she drew away her hand and returned to Charlotte.

"Now, what have you to tell me after all these years? Pretty tales I heard about you and your parson husband! Are you happy now, Charlotte?"

The matron shot an indignant glance at her tormentor.

"Dr. Morgan does his best to make me so, Aunt Dorothea," she said stiffly.

"Ah, that's right; he treats you better than that slave-driver did. Give me parsons for selfishness and tyranny. I told you how that would turn out before you married him. Medea, my dear child, you are not expected to listen to any incidental remarks. I have an awkward trick of dropping unpleasant comments."

Miss Godbold took off her ermine tippet, smiling grimly. She had succeeded in making Charlotte uneasy.

"I really think now I should like to see this Dr. Morgan. There ain't many men worth a pin's head; but they all speak well of him here. I have been making inquiries, and I don't hear of any airs and graces. Good Lord, I only wish I had him at Hangerfield to doctor my poor folks! There's a young jackanapes in our village, without the gumption to dose a cow."

Miss Godbold spoke without circumlocution or reserve, as though making inquiries concerning the doctor was a clear duty.

Charlotte twitched her embroidery bag in an ominous fashion.

"Aunt Dorothea," she began intrepidly, "you ought not to——" She stammered; then, meeting a lightning glance, subsided.

"I observe that you have now more spirit, my dear niece, than I remember in your disposition. Your virtues were latent, no doubt, and favourable circumstances have helped to develop them. Perhaps we should have got on better if you had been more vigorous in mind. You were going to say, Charlotte, I suppose, that my way of speaking about your husband is objectionable. My remarks, I have observed, frequently are distasteful to my friends and relatives. I don't cut and dry them to suit each fancy and pander to folks' vanities. I certainly consider, and have

no scruple in saying it, that you are a more fortunate woman in your second than your first choice. It isn't every man that would saddle himself with a helpless woman and four children, where there was nothing to be made out of them. One of the truepenny sort, your doctor, I'll go bail! Medea, do *you* like your step-father?"

The girl came out of the window recess with a red skein which she was winding hanging round her neck. She answered in her warm way—

"Do I like Dr. Morgan? Much more than that—I love him!"

Charlotte was unaccountably irritated by this fervour. It was strong testimony in support of Miss Dorothea's verdict. And that one of Nicholas's children should offer this confirmation was doubly aggravating. Moreover, the suspicion of jealousy regarding Medea and the doctor was

strengthening. They esteemed each other unduly, and she did not sanction her husband's approval of what she disapproved. A conflict of contradictory impulses waged in Charlotte's heart and a pink colour rose in her cheek. She remembered that more than once lately the doctor had taken the girl's part in trifling matters.

"Oh, you spontaneous creature—you sweet simpleton! How can the world ever treat you well? Can you tell a lie, Medea, or even the whitest of fibs? Has no one ever taught you the necessity of timely prevarications? Bah! *you* are not fit for society!"

Miss Godbold laughed in an odd way as Medea raised her eyes in mute wonder. Her face was absolutely transparent and truthful, and the singular ingenuous simplicity of her expression was not unmarked by the old lady.

"I do not understand you," said Medea,

flushing with a sort of resentment at what seemed a gibe.

"Your mother thinks there is no need for you to embrace Dr. Morgan's cause so warmly. He will get on much better without the seal of *your* approval." There was a gleam of mockery very distinct here. "By-the-by, Charlotte, I want to see the monument in your church—the charitable pall that covers Mr. Longstaffe's bones and sins. Where can I get the key?"

These persistent references to Nicholas chafed Charlotte in a sore place. She had almost forgotten the scar till this irritating touch handled it.

"The sexton will show you over the church," she said, with an angry colour rising. "Are you remaining long at Ellesmore?" she went on, wondering whether it was required of her to return this call.

"That depends—that depends," repeated the old woman testily.

"Where is your sister, Medea?" she continued, turning suddenly on the girl.

"Go fetch her, Medie," said Mrs. Morgan quickly, resolved at any price to rebuke the one who had dared to launch invidious comments at her late husband.

"Aunt, I think you have no need to speak of my children's father, in their very presence, in that malicious way. I cannot submit to such wicked aspersions on his memory. Indeed, it is a great cruelty on your part; and I believe you have come here only to make me unhappy. You never knew him—or his merits."

Charlotte quavered her last words weakly, combating a few tears.

"His merits? My patience, woman, what were they? I am surprised you have the Christian charity to forget his selfishness. Malicious I never was in my life. It is the truth you don't like being pelted with; there's nothing makes such nasty bruises."

Philomela came running into the room at this moment, with eyes full of laughter.

She was not at all ashamed to tell that she had burnt her natural little love-locks with Letty's slate pencil, in the endeavour to produce a stiff row of curls. She related it all quickly on her fingers, Medea interpreting vocally. Then she brought out her tablets, and sat down to entertain Aunt Dorothea. Had she seen the Christmas roses in the garden? At Hangerfield was there a greenhouse? Did she notice Miss Bragge's bouquet last night? What lovely roses! Where could they come from? Apollo said there was going to be a long frost, and there would be skating next week. How delightful! There was to be a concert in the schoolroom on Friday.

"I am going—I always go," wrote Phil. "It does not matter I do not hear; I see. I see more than other people, Medie says."

Miss Godbold was ready to believe it. With her spectacles on her big nose, she sat at a table, making herself agreeable to Phil, and toiling laboriously with a stumpy pencil to form her old-fashioned, graceful Italian letters.

The dumb girl's conversation never flagged. She was full of information and questions.

"Medea will play and Apollo will sing. They are so clever with music, you know. I shall never have a voice till after I die. Perhaps then it will be more beautiful than the other angels'. I shall want to sing and to tell so much. I shall always be telling."

Philomela had her own peculiar religious notions, but was chary in a general way of revealing such thoughts. Medea alone received them gravely and reverently, without argument; and the dumb girl's childlike realization of the golden city was

never set at naught or laughed at by her sister.

During Miss Godbold's toilsome task with Philomela's instrument, Mary Ann Allnut entered with a tea-tray. The open kitchen door to her rear admitted the objectionable odour of onions. Charlotte frowned severely at the handmaid; but in vain. She was too much occupied with the unusual service of handing teacups and preserving the equilibrium of the cream-jug to have eyes for anything else. She was "a rare one," as she termed it, for breaking china.

"Onions for supper! Your doctor knows what's good, Charlotte. Tea at five o'clock for me, woman! My goodness, Charlotte, you, a doctor's wife, such a fool as to drink it! Take it away, take it away! Thank the Lord, I've never had nerves. Why, you young people are all neuralgic or hysterical—pieces of wishy-washy material

that can't stand upright without tonics! Serve you right to be always in the doctor's hands for playing with your constitutions!"

Then Miss Dorothea took up her ermine tippet, standing up before the mirror and straightening the feathers in her bonnet as though preparing for departure.

Philomela had suddenly, as if inspired with some great idea, slipped out of the room. She came back shortly, with her hands behind her and a mischievous smile on her bright face. They signed to know what she held hidden. Dancing round the table in glee, she deposited on Miss Godbold's knee the renowned watch-pockets of pearl and crystal bead-work.

"Child, child!" said the old woman, with a glow of enthusiasm; "who told you I made 'em? I wonder they haven't found their way into the fire. None the worse for six and twenty years' wear either."

She had seized the works of art as though they were precious treasures. Relics they were of her youth, bringing back a flood of recollections. "I made 'em when I was a girl no older than you, Medea! Many is the time, Charlotte, that I've regretted parting with them. Perhaps you thought them a shabby gift for a wedding-present; but they meant more affection than you knew of, or cared for, perhaps. But I'll make it up to you and yours as sure as my name is Dorothea Godbold. I always meant to act well by you."

There was a pause, and then the old lady reverted to another subject. "Where is that handsome young spark, your brother, Medea? Bless you, I knew he wouldn't stay at home to see an old woman! Not making love to that Miss Cracknell, I hope? Those city hussies ain't to be trusted with a young man of good family. They'd set their caps at a

pair of tongs if it had respectable ancestors. Here comes the coach, and I dare say you've had enough of me! Her ladyship sent a hamper of rabbits in the rumble to the station. She thought the old woman would be too blind to see 'em; but, bless you, I'd have smelt 'em if I'd been as blind as a bat! It is a crying pity for an earl to turn huckster."

Then, with a few short words of farewell, Miss Godbold took leave of the party.

On the homeward way, about a mile from Lakenham Green, Miss Dorothea espied a young couple coming towards her.

The man, who stooped his comely head in close conversation with his companion, was Apollo Longstaffe, but the little maid was certainly not the "city hussy." It was, indeed, no other than the demure little Letty. Oh, Olivia, vigilant duenna, had you gone to sleep?

CHAPTER II.

DISCORDS.

Rachel was sitting at the feet of the fiddle. That is to say, the young hostess was on guard over Sir Bruce, while making ecstatic comments on his performances. He condescended this evening, for the first time at Lakenham, to play upon his beloved instrument. But making music for minds unequal to the interpretation of his skill was not to his liking. Mr. McCracken would talk loudly in *piano* passages, and the Misses Wilson fluttered the leaves of albums with irritating persistency. It was an aggravation of insult to hear every change of "movement" desig-

nated a *tune*. The baronet was quite well aware that Rachel was keeping a sharp eye on Medea as well as on himself. Indeed, his suspicions went beyond the truth, and he credited her with having invited the Longstaffes to dinner with some idea of discovering the nature of the intimacy existing between himself and the lady who had also lived at Hornhausen. Sir Bruce very well knew by this time that Miss McCracken regarded him in the light of a possible suitor. It amused him to watch her tactics, for he was a man of sufficient penetration to at once detect all her artifices. He admired her ability and estimated her shrewdness to the full, but at the same time was not ready to place himself in the attitude of a lover. He was not made of the stuff that is willing to sell its affections or name for wealth. He estimated his own advantages as worth something more than money,

though that was not to be despised when thrown in with other requisites. Now, Miss McCracken knew him to be needy, and made the great mistake of supposing him venal likewise. This he certainly was not.

He had not exchanged a single word with Medea this evening, and she had only bowed distantly to him on entering the room. It had been Apollo who had insisted on her accepting the invitation to dine with the McCrackens, and, with no available reason to offer for a refusal, she had been constrained to come.

This was a few nights after the triumph of Rachel's ball. Though this young lady's success had been unqualified on that occasion, she was aware that the cards she had still to play were not all trumps. Hers was a difficult game, and she had no understanding ally in Mr. McCracken, who was incapable of comprehending the *finesse*

she resorted to. It vexed Rachel to remember that Lady Wrexham had been cool and condescending, also that Miss Proteus had been heard to comment unfavourably on the lavish display of gold plate on the supper-table. Could she forget, either, that Tom Ringrose had been supercilious towards the Nichols', or that Mr. McCracken had drunk too much champagne, and that Dottie Wilson had sat out half the evening in a dark corner with a young subaltern? These were little mortifications she had to bear as the penalty of ambition. Oh no! certainly her entertainment, though pronounced a success, had not been unmixed pleasure to herself. Some of the big folks had plainly demonstrated their intentions towards their hostess. They were not going to take her into any intimate friendship, though they were quite willing to be entertained by her. And, certainly, if they ever gave

the biscuit man's daughter the smallest footing on their own platform, they would expect her to eat the pie of humility. Now, Rachel was particularly averse to such a diet, and had planned her own social bill of fare.

The astringent effects of Miss Proteus's stares upon her humbler neighbours had been observed by her. She herself did not shrink beneath the contemptuous regard of Arabella's bold eyes. Rather it braced her intelligence to combat difficulty and disdain.

It was delightful to remember how closely the countess had watched her as she coquetted with that lady's brother. After all, Mr. Ringrose might do worse than marry her. He was terribly conceited, though he had not a tenth part of her brains; but he was ill-qualified to play the part of a county magnate without assistance.

Rachel next reviewed Sir Bruce Onslow's qualifications and attractions. She certainly did not cherish any strong hopes here, and, unfortunately, she had never heard Miss Dormer's consoling dictum concerning "propinquity," to be encouraged thereby. The baronet was good-looking, she admitted—she was not quite sure if it was in the way she most admired—but she was puzzled concerning him. He was sarcastic and impenetrable. It was difficult to find out any weak points, or to play upon them. He evidently liked women's society. Yet, though he would flirt readily in a lazy way with her, he kept well clear of sentiment. Rachel instinctively felt that he knew she was neither so artless or simple as she appeared to be. Her affectations and masks were no disguise to him. She speculated freely whether he had come down to Lakenham with any matrimonial intentions regarding

herself. Miss Rachel had, in her time at Clapham, been courted by a considerable number of impecunious fortune-hunters. Penniless Indian officers, ambitious young stockbrokers, and a few waifs and strays from higher circles had drifted into her set. It had always been clear to her intelligence when such individuals meant business. But Sir Bruce was not similarly transparent. Perhaps he had no intentions.

Meanwhile, Rachel suffered her eyes to rest too frequently for her peace of mind upon Apollo Longstaffe. It was, indeed, a pity, for there was something rather too comely about his handsome head. More than once on this evening he cast up his blue eyes and caught her looking at him. He, of course, glanced towards her for approval. Had not his young hostess begged him in a confidential aside to do the agreeable to the Wilson girls?

And really he exerted himself strenuously at Rachel's bidding, and became, as a matter of course, the victim of his own good-nature.

After dinner he had offered to explain to Miss Dottie the mechanism of a Chinese puzzle. Then the pair of sisters quickly closed upon him and fenced him in with their chairs, leaving no further hope of escape. They were supremely happy, giving Scripture riddles to the martyr. Rachel, looking on at his perplexity, suffered a few qualms of pity.

"All at sixes and sevens," she reflected, as she glanced round the room. Mr. McCracken was answering Miss Pilkington's questions at random. In pursuance of a new method of attack, this lady had discarded steel ornaments and butterfly raiment. She braved the illumination of many wax lights in the sombre severity of matronly black satin and jet. But Mr.

McCracken's round eyes were inappreciative of such mature charms. They turned incessantly towards the loadstone of a distant ottoman, where Medea, in her white gown, sat near Tom Ringrose. This young man endeavoured, with unusual suavity, and without his customary condescension, to make himself pleasant to his companion. After his lights he had judiciously aired science and philosophy—or what he considered such. To tell the truth, he was astounded at his own knowledge, which, as Miss Longstaffe never contradicted, he assumed to be correct. Rachel's warning had been unavailing.

"I assure you, Mr. Ringrose, it will be no use trying to make yourself agreeable to Miss Longstaffe. She's quite a blue, Sir Bruce tells me, much too clever to care to talk to you or me."

Tom already suspected Rachel, not unfairly, as you know, of harbouring inten-

tions regarding himself, therefore was not best pleased at such advice.

"Deuce take that girl!" he said to himself; "does she think I know nothing?" Then he remembered that he had more than once been flogged in his juvenile days for a marked indifference to writing and arithmetic, and bethought him that his spelling was even yet not irreproachable. Still these recollections did not deter him from doing court to the fair Minerva who had taken his fancy.

He was sure he was getting on well. It is true the lady might have turned her fine eyes more frequently upon him. Probably she was shy, and perhaps also unaccustomed to the marked attentions of men of position.

This eligible young bachelor had been brought up to believe that all young ladies, properly constituted, would give their minds and ears to his addresses, and

be certain to approve his doings and sayings. Happy Tom!

He was generally on the *qui vive* to detect stratagems and wiles which might lure him into complimentary speech. Therefore the monosyllabic rejoinders vouchsafed by Medea did not disconcert him in the least. Rather they lent encouragement. She was certainly shy, no doubt overcome by his politeness.

"You fond of music?" he inquired, edging a little nearer. Her profile was turned to him. The only way to ensure a glance from those grave eyes was to ask a question. When she did turn them on him, Tom most inconsequently felt disposed to fall back a little. Their serene calm disconcerted him. This was no doubt the first divinity he had ever been constrained to worship with reverence.

"Yes, I play a great deal," she said,

smiling a little, thinking she had been over-curt previously.

"Oh, ah—indeed! Yes, of course you do. You do everything, I hear, and everything well. Really, 'pon my word, you don't look as if you did, either. There were some terrible blues at Oxford—wore short hair and spectacles."

Medea went on smiling, and Tom, unabashed, proceeded—

"Know a tune called 'Nancy Lee'? This is how it goes."

Here Tom made a lamentable failure in an attempt to hum the air specified. Medea's eyes opened more widely and her smile broadened.

"Give me something cheerful, Miss Longstaffe. Oh, Lord, only to think of those days at Oxford, when Bruce scraped melancholy ditties under my room from morning till night!"

Recollecting his sufferings, Tom's eyes

expanded and he dropped his eyeglass. He did not notice the quick colour which flushed Medea's face.

"In Germany we play chiefly classical music, but I think I have heard 'Nancy Lee,'" she said hurriedly, wishing to be spared further recollections.

"Oh yes, by George, I forgot! Those poor German beggars always hammer away at things that ain't pleasant. A good deal of the 'music of the future' you call it, now, don't you?" Tom thought he had perpetrated a piece of wit, and laughed at his own joke. "Steal a march on us wherever they can, those Germans. The poor devils are determined to cut us out everywhere. Look at all the clerks and waiters there are."

Tom was satisfied that he was becoming brilliant. This divine creature, so calmly receptive, evoked his mental strength, he was sure. He forgot his laconic method

beneath the quiet encouragement accorded to him. His companion neither ogled nor simpered. What a pleasure to hold conversation with a girl who did not interrupt and scatter his slowly gathered ideas!

"Ever been at Baden, Miss Longstaffe? I remember once seeing a little chap called Wagner there. Every one made the deuce of a fuss about him. He was strutting about, cock of the walk, arm in arm with grand dukes. Those German princes don't think small beer of themselves either" —confidentially. "Now, he was a classical beggar, I suppose?"

Medea intimated that such was the case.

At this moment Tom frowned at an unwelcome approach.

"And pray what do you know about things classical, you dweller in Bœotia? I am sorry, Miss Longstaffe, to interrupt Mr. Ringrose's instructive remarks, but I am compelled to ask you to do me the

favour of playing an accompaniment. There is no one here equal to the task, except yourself, and I know your skill of old."

The exaggerated deference of Sir Bruce's words was accented by his manner and a profound bow. Tom Ringrose felt himself thrown in the background by an insensible process. When Sir Bruce approached a woman, other men were apt to experience a sensation of nothingness.

Medea changed colour as a piece of music was handed to her. That lovely *andante* motive had once upon a time been the prelude to this man's love-making. It was surely a wanton outrage to ask her to play it now and here! He could not have forgotten. Nevertheless, the high-souled creature, quivering in every heart-string, walked across the long room to the piano and sat down to play.

Mr. McCracken hovered, smiling, in the

rear. He marked with supreme satisfaction the young lady's ease at the instrument. Her masterly fingering of the keys certified her power. Medea's lovely arms were bare to the elbow, but she wore no gold band to-night. The doctor had driven her to Bedmondstone yesterday, and she had come back without the bracelet.

No one in the room, except Apollo and Sir Bruce, had any notion of Medea's musical gifts. Mrs. Morgan had never vaunted her daughter's brilliant successes. Her certificates from the Berlin Academy could be of no interest or importance to Lakenham.

Medea went through the concerted piece with a sort of mechanical precision. It was something widely different to her usual spirited rendering. The accompaniment only faintly shadowed her brilliant powers. At its conclusion Tom Ringrose said audibly—

"We've had enough of your fiddle, Onslow. Put it to 'by-by.' Miss Longstaffe will give us a solo."

Mr. McCracken was quick to second this request.

"I am sure you will oblige *me*, Miss Longstaffe. I dote on music—am quite devoted to art in all its branches. And your performance is really—er—so very—satisfactory—in fact, I may say, brilliant. Now, there's that girl of mine, who has had every advantage money can buy, and it don't seem to have helped her a brass farthing. I'll stake my life not a third of the cash has been spent on you."

At this moment Olivia drew near, minded to intercept the admiring glances cast towards her young friend, who was so dangerously receptive of masculine attentions. In truth, Medea's tranquillity beneath his patronage had made an impression on Mr.

McCracken similar to that experienced by Tom Ringrose.

The biscuit-maker had certainly been spoilt by the ladies round about Clapham. It was said that many as youthful and well-dowered as Sophia Wilson had been willing to be led to the altar, had he been disposed to persuade.

When Medea's musical talents came to light on this particular evening, over and above her handsome looks there shone the halo of accomplishments. As the hours went on, Mr. McCracken approved yet more and more. He was invulnerable to any ordinary attack, though, unfortunately, Olivia did not know it. He had been a widower long enough to recognize, as he expressed it, "the tricks of women's trade" —this trade being, as he believed, to get them expeditiously or advantageously married. He was not to be overreached by any art or stratagem. Why, bless you,

the young ladies and widows at Wandsworth and Putney had been steadily setting their caps at him for half a dozen years! It was probably Rachel who first opened his eyes to the machinations of such fair and crafty ones. This was skilful policy on her part, for suspicions once sowed in his arrogant breast bore seed an hundred-fold.

But he failed to detect any of the customary wiles and manœuvres about Miss Longstaffe's demeanour. She was superbly unconscious of, or indifferent to, his looks and flatteries.

As Mr. McCracken perceived Olivia's approach, he threw his chest, or rather, that lower part of him which his watch-chain vainly cabled, forwards, in an attitude of defiance. Miss Pilkington had persecuted him with her attentions on the night of the ball; and this irascible gentleman was seriously inclined to administer some cutting reproof.

What Mr. McCracken euphemistically called "giving a hint," was apt to bear the colour of insult. Rachel, perceiving his ireful hue, endeavoured to avert the catastrophe of a public breach of manners. She rose, and beckoned Olivia to a distant table, where she disposed her in conversation with Sir Bruce, who was looking through loose music. Apollo, being yet in bondage, glanced wistfully over the heads of his captors.

"We've got to the Lesser Prophets," said Dottie cheerfully, as Rachel passed near to her. "Sophy is quite shocked to find out how little Scripture History Mr. Longstaffe knows. He really ought to attend her Bible classes. He hasn't guessed one enigma yet."

In vain the sisters smiled encouragement on the handsome young man in their toils. Being desperate, he finally turned sulky.

"Mr. Ringrose,—" Tom started at the sound of a plaintive voice at his elbow; he was watching Medea at the piano from afar—"they tell me we shall have some skating soon. It is freezing hard to-night. Don't you think it will be much nicer than hunting?"

Medea struck some opening chords.

"Come over to the ottoman," continued Rachel; "we can't hear ourselves speak here. Now, don't frown at me, Mr. Ringrose. I assure you Miss Longstaffe is not thinking of me or of you. Look at her now."

Tom turned involuntarily at her request. Medea was seated at the piano, and her wide eyes looked straight before her into space. There seemed in them a curious strength of sight. It appeared as if she saw something that others did not see. When she played she seemed to be taken out of herself, and there was a strange sort

of impressiveness about her looks. Apollo had said often that it made people uncomfortable, and for this reason did not encourage a public performance of skill. It was quite possible that it did disturb the serenity of the frivolous. Few cared to know that another breathed a higher and mystical atmosphere which they, who were frivolous, did not. The constraint of this music now checked Olivia's volubility, Sir Bruce manifesting impatience towards her queries.

"Really, Miss Longstaffe, you delight me," said Mr. McCracken, caressing the red fringe encircling his face. "I'll guarantee this instrument has never been touched by any hands of your mark, for all that I gave three hundred, money down on the nail, for it. There's those girls of Wilson's." Mr. McCracken forbore to lower his voice, though the gentleman specified was close at hand, enjoying a surreptitious

nap in the shadow of a marble divinity. "Well, I'm blessed if those girls don't belong to an Early Rising Society! There they are, at seven o'clock in the morning, squalling like a pair of hoarse cats, and thumping scales fit to break every string in the body of this instrument. Rachel's piano upstairs ain't powerful enough, they say."

Recalling the matutinal exercises which so disturbed his morning slumbers, Mr. McCracken gave a rap to the music-rest which caused every one to look round. Mr. Wilson woke with a start, thinking the marble Juno, or Venus, or some other naughty lady had embraced him unawares.

Once more Medea made an attempt to vacate the music-stool; but her delighted host laid a detaining hand, with a too familiar gesture, upon her bare arm.

Two other men marked the action, just as men do mark and resent the handling

of aught they value highly, from a piece of china to a woman. Tom Ringrose frowned openly, swearing beneath his breath; Sir Bruce quietly closed his eyes.

"Now, stay where you are, my dear young lady," said the host, with insistent smiles. "There ain't a performer to touch you in the room. You're as good as a professional at five pounds a tune. Let's have a good rousing, as a wind-up—a piece to curl our hair a bit. Away with melancholy—we'll have a chorus! Who'll join?"

Rachel now deemed it high time to change the order of things.

"Dottie dear, I should be so much obliged if you and Sophia would sing your Italian duet now Miss Longstaffe has finished. Is the music here or in my boudoir?" she said suavely to her friend.

Miss McCracken stood behind Apollo's chair. He could not see her face without turning round.

Miss Dottie had become suspicious of her whilom friend since the day of that brisk dance over the fields. If she had but known that this perfidious Rachel had, in the earlier part of the day, concealed the famous ballad whereof mention was made, with the firm determination that her guests should not be harrowed with its twelve long verses! It would certainly never come to light till she herself should discover it in an old *Graphic* newspaper. It had been agreed that the sisters should perform on this evening, and the tremulous shakes and uncertain runs of their song had sorely exercised her patience for the past two days.

Apollo rose quickly when Miss Wilson's chair was pushed back. He cast a look at Rachel which caused that young lady to be aware of quickening pulses.

Oh, Apollo! you should not look so fiercely at young ladies. The angry gleam

of your handsome blue eyes was really too forcible and touching.

"You sing, your sister says," murmured Rachel, sweetly repentant, as she cast down her eyes.

"Does she admit it?" he rejoined angrily. "Then, I suppose I can, for Medea has critical ears in music."

After that Apollo did sing, and right lustily, in a strong barytone, with his eyes shining and his curly head thrown well back. All the Longstaffes had this proud trick more or less; but it was exercised unconsciously.

"You sing divinely!" whispered Rachel, before she moved away. Apollo was mollified.

"That boy has a very fine voice," commended Sir Bruce *sotto voce*.

The baronet always made it felt that his approval was a warrant of merit. But, then, he approved so rarely. Olivia smiled,

well satisfied at this admission. She felt she had a proprietary interest in Apollo.

"The *dear* boy!" she ejaculated, with fervent aspiration on the adjective.

She had been very communicative to Sir Bruce concerning Dr. Morgan's circumstances, and the qualities of his adopted family. She descanted freely on Charlotte's loss of position by this second marriage, and the disapproval of some of the Godbold faction. She had not the faintest idea that her companion was drawing out these revelations. Yet a more discerning person might have been deceived. So lazily indifferent was the manner of rejoinder and question adopted by Sir Bruce, that the most suspicious would hardly have held him to be interested. Indeed, why should such a fine-mannered, aristocratic gentleman, who lived in the great world of life and fashion, trouble his head about insignificant country residents?

"They are certainly a handsome family, these Longstaffes," he said carelessly; "one rarely lights on such phenomena in out-of-the-way places." After a pause—"I suppose they've good blood in them."

Olivia was not feeling well disposed towards Medea, who was all unconscious of the overmuch civility of her host.

"Then you mean to say you admire Medea? Really what strange taste you men have! You should see little Flossie; she is the flower of the flock—a perfect little beauty, though immature, of course. Neither Medea nor Philomela can compare with *her*."

Sir Bruce regarded Miss Pilkington in a bored way, lifting one leg and nursing it over his knee.

"Oh, indeed! There is yet another sister?"

He had watched Rachel detach her father from Medea's side on some trivial

pretext, and noticed that Tom Ringrose at once slipped into the vacant place.

"But I thought—I understood that you were acquainted with Medea abroad? Did you know nothing of her family history? But there, now; I forgot that Medea is so peculiar—so reserved—a sad example of modern progress, to my mind."

Olivia sighed. Sir Bruce uncrossed his leg, looking still more bored. Miss Pilkington thought he was about to leave her side.

"Oh yes, we were acquainted; but we generally confined our conversation to music and the fine arts. Miss Longstaffe is not a young lady to put you in possession of her family history between the movements of a sonata. She is not a great talker anywhere, I fancy. May I inquire in what way this young lady is so peculiar as to make *you* sad?"

Olivia saw no sarcasm, but it was dis-

agreeable to her to be pressed definitely on any point. She answered reluctantly—

"Oh, so eccentric, you know! None of the charming, light-hearted frivolity of a girl. At her age one looks for more levity. And she wears such peculiar clothes, as you see. You can't even say she has a waist. It is in very bad taste to make herself singular. Besides this, she speaks her mind in a most unseemly way, and knows Latin and Greek. And she has such a very odd way of staring at gentlemen—most unfeminine, I call it. Pray look at her now."

Olivia was smarting beneath a certainty of transferred favour. Mr. McCracken had danced a quadrille with her at the ball, and had made himself agreeable at the church door on Sunday. She was positive that he had been disposed to further advances till a younger rival appeared on the scene.

Sir Bruce began to get an inkling of this matter.

"Yes, really, Miss Pilkington, now you draw my attention to it, I see there is something not—what shall I say?—quite discreet about Miss Longstaffe's way of looking at Mr. McCracken. But she did not gain the reputation of being a flirt at Hornhausen."

Sir Bruce looked reflectively at his shoes, as though trying to conjure up some recollection which might condemn her.

"You mistake my meaning, Sir Bruce, I fear. I have no desire to intimate that Medea *flirts*. Far be it from me to stain her character with such an imputation. My chief objections are to her notions of woman's independence, as well as her absurd simplicity. It is intolerable that a young lady should know no different way of regarding — gentlemen — that Medea

should look at Mr. McCracken with the same confidence as at *me*."

Then Sir Bruce stood up, smiling. "Old and young, rich and poor, are, perhaps, all alike to her. Hers must be a singularly disinterested character."

As the baronet walked off to the other end of the room, Olivia shot a glance of indignation after him. It dawned upon her faintly that her disparaging note had not been approved of.

Before her departure that evening, Miss Pilkington gained the consent of the McCrackens to patronize the annual village concert, which was to take place at the end of the week.

On the homeward way, this lady, who shared, as she termed it, a Bedmondstone fly with the Longstaffes, was very bitter in her remarks about Sir Bruce. The lady spoke in no measured terms of his unmanly airs and graces.

"What did he come here for? There's evidently no one good enough for him at the Hall. He all but yawns in one's face, and doesn't disguise his rudeness to poor dear Mr. McCracken. He didn't appear to remember much about you, Medea. Evidently you made no great impression *there*." Olivia laughed with derisive emphasis.

"Did you ever know me to make an impression anywhere?" said Medea, thankful for the darkness which helped her to veil her confusion with a jest.

"Well, for my part, I've no patience with a young man who thinks life is made for himself and his fiddle!" concluded Olivia, as the fly drew up at the rectory gate and she dislodged herself. The only part of the sharing of this vehicle which the lady did not understand was the payment thereof.

CHAPTER III.

SCHERZO.

The *staccato* passages in Mr. McCracken's life had been few. The serious business of money-making had not suffered him to take the hours airily or with enjoyment. He had been no *debonnair* or sprightly youth when his figure had been slim and hair abundant—in the days when he courted Rachel's mother from a humble lodging at Brixton. The warranty of youth had never incited him to kick over traces. Flour had, from earliest years, oppressed his articulation, and love's voice had been clogged at the very outset of his life. In fact, his mind and inclinations had been prematurely

smothered in the dusty atmosphere of his trade. The muffled beat of steam-engines had reiterated within hearing of his cradle, "Life is biscuits." Beneath clouds of steam and stirring of pastes, the clear, bright voice of love had not been suffered to speak. But the vapours had now lifted, and leisure began to breed sentiment. Affections formerly congested by business considerations yielded to the softening influence of idleness.

Mr. McCracken had met Medea only three times when he began to think that love was a language he would like to learn; it would be a distinctly pleasant recreation, which would lend new vivacity and interest to his mature years. I do not go so far as to say that this elderly gentleman had never contemplated matrimony since the early demise of Rachel's mother. Though he was aware of the nets spread abroad for him, he had once or twice been on the

verge of a proposal—on the verge only, for he was eminently cautious. At times the expediency of the thing had almost persuaded him to sacrifice himself. The aspiring ladies who had aimed at the distinction of ruling Coomassie Lodge, Clapham Common, had, unfortunately, been too ready to receive his preliminary advances.

Now, Mr. McCracken was a man with a large development of combativeness. He had resisted the public antipathy to adulterated flour till there had grown up a conviction that his biscuits were innocuous, as well as palatable. He had fought a good fight, from his youth up, against adverse circumstances and rival competitors. He had conquered fortune and favour, which conquests left him with the conviction that the social worlds left to him to vanquish would ultimately be reached.

When this gentleman sat solitary in the smoking-room, late on the evening recorded

in the last chapter, a gentle melancholy pervaded his thoughts. New and delightful sensation, this envelopment in clouds of tender anticipation! He allowed his cigar to go out, and neglected the tumbler at his elbow. Now Mr. McCracken was quite as partial to whiskey-toddy as to champagne and old port; and this disregard of a favourite beverage argued profound thought or physical derangement. A speculative dreaminess dwelt in his protuberant eyes, and from time to time a sentimental smile passed over his face. The spectacle of a middle-aged, prosaic gentleman in the throes of love, or even at an incipient stage, is apt to be ridiculous. Happily, Rachel was not at hand to contemplate his weak and flaccid aspect, or to make cynical remarks thereon.

At this particular moment she was off guard, just stepping into her damask-hung couch, and speculating seriously which was

the best string to her particular bow. Her hopes regarding Tom Ringrose's or Sir Bruce's intentions were not at fever heat. Why would Apollo Longstaffe's tender glances interpose between her and more practical views? Her calculating little heart proved it was not absolutely a machine, by giving sudden, irregular leaps when she thought of a certain curly head.

The result of Mr. McCracken's solitary cogitations in the small hours were made manifest on the morrow. He began by displaying a remarkable amount of care over his toilet. Half a dozen scarves were rejected before a brilliant blue, with an orange lightning pattern running over it, was deemed worthy of the occasion. It was further embellished by an opal pin. But, in spite of prolonged ministrations at the altar of vanity, no especial complacency distinguished Mr. McCracken's deportment at the breakfast-table. He glared at kid-

neys and bloaters, angrily complaining that the tea was cold and the toast tough. He confided in a loud aside to Mr. Wilson some internal derangement, smiting himself forcibly on the right side.

"I've a touch of liver this morning. Cold weather plays the deuce with my constitution. Give you my word, I never slept a wink."

The liver is an organ regarding which there is no decent reticence. If it refuses to maintain its functions, the proclamation of its weakness is made abroad without shame.

Each in turn suggested a remedy to their suffering host. Sophia Wilson, being practically minded, as befitted a female missionary, presently sped upstairs, and returned to Mr. McCracken's side, bearing in her hands a miniature ark—her homœpathic case. This ministering spirit was promptly thrust into the background,

her interest on the sufferer's behalf meeting with scant gratitude.

"Don't irritate him, dear. He is very violent when his liver is wrong. He might even swear at you," whispered Rachel, appearing on the scene as Sophia, blind to Mr. McCracken's gathering wrath, measured out her globules.

This gentleman, to tell the truth, was working his complaint diplomatically. The stratagems of love are ever new and varied. He had fully resolved to submit his liver to Dr. Morgan's hands.

This condescension towards the local practitioner would come to Medea's ears; and surely she would be gratified if he was gracious enough to promote a parish doctor to the honour of administering to his derangements. His patronage was an indirect tribute to her merits and amiable behaviour. What a discreet and sensible young lady she appeared to be!

He had observed none of the flippancy and coquetry adopted by other young women towards him. She never even spoke to him unless first addressed. Naturally she recognized his superior standing. Only a governess, they said. Her behaviour, of course, was quite becoming towards one of his position.

But Mr. McCracken had to scheme for the disposal of his house party before he could carry his project into effect. He was not desirous that they should get wind of his intentions.

Rachel, he knew, was to drive into Bedmondstone with the other girls during the afternoon. Sophia was knitting garters strenuously for the female converts of the Zogobad mission, and had run short of materials, which necessitated a shopping expedition.

Sir Bruce and Mr. Wilson had yet to be got rid of. Friend Wilson was a limpet

not easy to dislodge, being a faithful satellite to his host.

Passing through the billiard-room before luncheon, Mr. McCracken discovered Sir Bruce idly knocking the balls about. He had the appearance of waiting for some one, for he turned round quickly at the opening of the door.

"Not been out this fine morning, hey, Onslow? So sorry I ain't fit to shoot to-day. By-the-by, there's a spinney or two north of Copley Wood, which Fisher tells me ought to be cleared. S'pose you and old Wilson shoot through them this afternoon? It will only take you a couple of hours. I ain't really fit to hold a gun. That port wine has played the deuce with me."

Again Mr. McCracken slapped himself vindictively on the right side. The younger man made a cannon deliberately before replying.

"No, thanks, Mr. McCracken; I'll let shooting alone for to-day. I have some letters to write, and the young ladies have promised to take me out this afternoon."

Mr. McCracken rattled his loose silver splenetically. He was a very arbitrary host, and disapproved of any departure from his plans.

Of course, if Sir Bruce went to Bedmondstone it would be right; but here was a young man fearfully given to changing his mind. He might at the last moment see fit to stay at home. Surely, guests ought to accept the amusements provided for them, said Mr. McCracken to himself. However, Sir Bruce was notoriously remiss in this matter, invariably pleasing himself.

"Just as you please," said the biscuit-maker fretfully. "I place no constraint on my visitors—none whatever. Liberty Hall, you know—Liberty Hall."

But the way in which Mr. McCracken slammed the door did not express an absolute approval of freedom.

Presently Rachel's sleek head intruded itself through another entrance.

"Poor, poor young man—all alone! Not waiting for any one, I hope?"

"You said you would come. I am never in a hurry, you know."

He handed her a cue.

"No, no," she said, rejecting it with a little petulant shake of her head; "my numerous duties do not allow me the pleasure of playing with you. I am on my way to inquire after papa's health. Have you seen him since breakfast? Do you think there is really anything the matter with him? I do believe there's something on his mind. I know the barometer of his mind so well. Any shares gone down, or companies smashed, do you know?"

Sir Bruce made a spot stroke carefully. "It's only indigestion," he said.

"Or love," said Rachel, looking down. "Don't they sometimes wear the same complexion?" She spoke with innocent inquiry.

He smiled sarcastically. "Oh, what charming ignorance! Then you know the colour of neither, Miss McCracken? Happiest of women! Certainly they *do* both wear an irritable hue, and they both disturb our rest and affect our appetites. Who is the lady honoured by Mr. McCracken's approval? Not, surely, the benevolent Miss Sophia?"

Rachael twisted her rings about with a meditative look, well-assumed, on her small face.

"Don't you think Miss Pilkington would make me a nice step-mamma? I should be so happy to see her wearing diamonds instead of cut steel." She paused a moment, and then looked up, delivering

her thrust with an air of doubt. "Or what would you say to that handsome Miss Longstaffe with a tiara?"

Sir Bruce's eyes were cast down, and he turned and chalked his cue, laughing disagreeably as he rejoined scoffingly—

"'And jewels so fair I will twine in my hair.' So that is likely to be Miss Longstaffe's choice. Certainly, all things are possible where women's hearts and men's pockets are concerned." He did not believe Rachel in the least, nevertheless a doubt passed through his mind.

"'Her heart it might break, for somebody's sake,' you perhaps think, Sir Bruce," said Rachel. "Well, if she says nay to papa I won't be responsible for his liver. It really is too hard to expect a daughter to share the pangs of a despised love. Ta, ta! I'm going now. I hear Dottie Wilson coming. She has won a gipsy fortune-teller in a raffle, and is very anxious to

predict your future. She has promised me a scion of the aristocracy as a husband." With a rippling laugh, which re-echoed after her, Rachel disappeared.

Mr. McCracken's state of health did not, of course, allow him to appear at the luncheon-table. He fortified himself privately with *curaçoa*, and *pâte de foie gras* sandwiches, coming out to watch the departure when the carriage drove round to the door. He would make quite sure that Sir Bruce *did* go.

Having to his satisfaction seen the whole party seated, he watched them disappear down the drive. Then he got himself into a very costly fur-lined coat—a new purchase, which did not add to the slenderness of his proportions—and followed the retreating vehicle at a good round pace. But he soon diverged from the Bedmonstone road, and took a short cut to the Green.

Dr. Morgan, who was digesting his early dinner in his sanctum, and who, to tell the truth, was indulging in a blissful nap, woke with a start when Mary Ann announced the illustrious patient.

"Eh, what? Some one to see me, Mary Ann? Is it Mrs. Tickleton's spasms again, or has Mrs. Dobbs's fourteenth come at last? Show the young person in."

Naturally, being suddenly roused, the doctor was not quite coherent.

"La, sir, it ain't no young person; and I didn't say nothing about Mrs. Dobbs, though I wishes as I might. She have waited that patient, she have, as is an example to mothers and a warning to them as thinks of matermoney. It is Mr. McCracken as wishes to see you—the gentleman from the Hall."

All this was quite audible to the gentleman outside, Mary Ann Allnut feeling under constraint of shouting at her master,

inasmuch as he appeared dazed and incredulous.

On the sill of the window of this room —consulting-room by courtesy—there was an open German book, with a manuscript in a bold, free hand beside it. Medea had been translating here during the morning, it being the only spot free from domestic interruptions. This room looked hardly different to what it did some twelve years ago, when I first introduced you to the doctor. At this moment, with his spectacles resting on his forehead, and his bandana handkerchief fallen to the ground, he looked quite guilty of his forty winks.

No professional air of sympathetic gravity was on his face till he caught sight of the visitor, flushed and breathing heavily. The *curaçoa*, the sandwiches, the fur coat, rapid exercise, and a fear of detection by Miss Pilkington, or any other gossiping faction, had accelerated Mr.

McCracken's pulses. Moreover, this would-be patient was conscious of a digestion with which no fault was to be found. He was not quite sure if the doctor might not detect the imposture of his liver.

"Take a chair, my dear sir. You appear fatigued or agitated."

Dr. Morgan's eyes, as clear and bright as of yore, in spite of sixty years, twinkled merrily as he surveyed his heated visitor. Mr. McCracken's stiff fringe of beard was now sadly out of curl, and his cambric handkerchief mopped his face persistently.

"A touch gone in the wind, doctor. All owing to liver. A man of my age ought to run like a greyhound."

It was difficult to picture Mr. McCracken running fleetly, nevertheless the doctor gravely assented.

"I've come to be set to rights; dandelion, you know, or some simple prescription will do. My medical man in town, Sir

Pryout Diddleby, always recommends the simplest remedies. My constitution is so very susceptible."

Mr. McCracken thought Dr. Morgan ought to look more overpowered at the mention of Sir Pryout Diddleby, a physician pre-eminently famous, who ministered at the couch of royalty. The biscuit-maker had by this time regained his breath, and the spirit of patronage had come again to him as he glanced round the shabby apartment. The great gulf between himself and Medea was more apparent. This country practitioner, who did not appear over-gratified by his appearance, ought clearly to understand that he was conferring a signal favour in suffering him to mix a pill on his behalf.

With due gravity, the doctor, who suspected there was not much amiss, went through the ordinary routine of questions. Mr. McCracken thought it a great omission

not to look at his tongue or feel his pulse.

"I should recommend you not to take any active exercise, my dear sir, or to indulge unduly at late meals," said Dr. Morgan, drawing the inkstand towards him. "The acceleration of blood to the head is not desirable in a man of your years."

Mr. McCracken was about to repel the insinuation of middle age; but at this moment the sound of rippling notes from a piano was borne to his ears. He gave a very perceptible start.

"Ah, you are nervous," said our doctor. "It is only my daughter practising. The concert to-morrow night keeps my young people busy. The walls of this house are thin."

Mr. McCracken, in his enthusiasm for music, kept audible time with his foot on a piece of oilcloth which covered a thread-

bare place in the carpet. It did not at all signify that he was always half a bar behind the rapid, playful movement.

"Yes, yes; to be sure. And Miss Longstaffe is so highly gifted, it is a pleasure to listen to her. Her performances at our house last night were highly creditable. She might make money out of her hands, doctor. Better than governessing, I should say—hey?"

"Medea has never been a governess yet. Has she informed you that she intends to become one?" said the doctor, standing up on the hearthrug in a stiff attitude.

"Oh—ah—my dear sir; no offence meant. I—er—understood from various sources that she had held a situation abroad. Such a very superior young lady—it did—er—strike me as unlikely she would have occupied a menial position."

Alas, Mr. McCracken! your country practitioner is not disposed to mercy after

that speech. I should not wonder now if you received a very nauseous draught for the benefit of your liver.

"As to that, Mr. McCracken, I doubt if Medea would consider the profession of teaching *menial*. And it is rather, in my opinion, worthy of honour to have a mind and intelligence equal to imparting good manners or refinement to others. And it is an arduous task, for there are some to whom no amount of labour would impart polish. The fact is, my step-daughter, who is a very talented young woman, finds no scope for her abilities in this little place. After a long course of studies abroad, she was persuaded by the Duke of Hornhausen's sister to come and live with her for a time as companion and guest, and has only recently returned here at her mother's request."

Mr. McCracken began to feel uncomfortable. "Oh — ah — indeed; I quite

understand. Highly flattering to the young lady, of course."

Mr. McCracken then thought it advisable to change the subject. A sardonic gleam in the doctor's eye, generally so placable, intimated that he had put his foot in it. This gentleman poked the fire fiercely, and then looked at the clock.

Mr. McCracken rose from his seat. "I will send a groom for the mixture this evening," he said.

"Won't you wait and take it?" rejoined the doctor. "I'll mix it in five minutes."

If Mr. McCracken's wits had been nimble he would have seized this excuse to remain and conciliate his adversary, but his outraged dignity was his first thought. A positive insult—from an apothecary!

"I don't keep a pack of lazy, idle servants to see me carry home parcels!" he said with unwarranted energy, as he

passed out of the room. But in the passage outside he paused, recalling a forgotten matter. Not only to see the doctor had he come hither. With the air of a stage villain he looked over his shoulder, and he drew his coat round him with resolved intention. In almost a whisper he addressed Mary Ann.

"My good woman, if Miss Longstaffe is at home show me into the drawing-room."

The die was cast. He plunged forward. The performer on the piano sat with her back to the door. Without turning, she said in faintly reproachful accents—

"So you have come to practice at last, Apollo. Do you know you have mixed all my music with your songs? I can't find anything I want."

"Ahem!" coughed the visitor, throwing his waistcoat forward. "Pray allow me to assist you in your search."

Medea had turned at that note of warning. Her expressive eyes declared her astonishment.

"How do you do?" she said in the mechanical way of our nation, but forgetting to stretch out a hand. "I fear my mother is not at home."

Mr. McCracken, staring unabashed at her, replied—

"I am sorry not to have the pleasure of meeting your mother. I merely called to consult Dr. Morgan regarding my health, and—er—hearing the piano, I thought I would venture to inquire if you reached home safely last night. These country vehicles are so—sometimes such rickety affairs, and their drivers frequently not sober. I should have been happy to send you home in my brougham. Pray understand it is at your service in future on such occasions."

The absurdity of Mr. McCracken's pre-

text for an interview moved Medea to a gentle smile.

"Oh no," she said, "there is no danger to us; and you certainly would have heard if there had been any accident. We can safely trust our lives to Bedmondstone drivers. There was never a tradition of any accident here. The fly we had last night was not at all rickety, and it was drawn by a steady old horse that does duty in a hearse. Miss Pilkington thinks that ensures her safety."

There was a little pause. Then Mr. McCracken deposited his hat on a chair and drew nearer the piano.

"Sweet thing I heard you playing—light and airy, nice and cheerful to whistle to. What do you call the tune?"

Medea, still on the music-stool, touched the keys, repeating a quick passage with her right hand.

"It is a Scherzo. Something that is light and trivial, it means—a frivolous passage that often comes in serious music. Do you like it? To me it is sometimes a great relief to play a light rondo in the midst of graver music. It is like life. If things were altogether sad and serious, who could bear it?"

Her words escaped her quickly. She had hardly considered to whom she was speaking. Then, meeting his glance and seeing he looked at her without intelligence, she blushed painfully. Such reflections were unintelligible to Mr. McCracken.

"Pretty room this," he said presently. "No melancholy here." He stuck his thumbs one in each waistcoat pocket, and regarded the furniture with the estimating gaze of a dealer. "Tasteful, without any extravagance. Highly commendable, I'm sure." Turning his face to the sketches on the wall, he continued, "As good as

chromos, I swear. Your paintings, of course, Miss Longstaffe."

Medea shook her head in dissent.

"Ah, you're too modest—too modest by half. Don't you know about the light under a bushel? I do—er—hope that you and my girl will hit it off when you see more of each other. I feel sure she will derive benefit from your cultivated taste. You are a young lady who, I observe, raises the tone of her surroundings. There is about Rachel an air of frivolity and levity which I do not approve of."

Medea, rising from her seat, straightened her music. Her colour rose.

"I am not an easy person to make friends with, Mr. McCracken; and I am sure that you put an undue estimate on my powers. It would be a great impertinence on my part to endeavour to influence your daughter's mind."

Medea was really very angry. Such undisguised flattery deeply offended her.

"Well, well, all in good time. My girl don't always know which side her bread is buttered."

With this enigmatical speech Mr. McCracken took up his hat, considering he had made himself sufficiently agreeable for once. Medea became faintly conscious of some special intention of favour in the warmth with which he pressed her hand. Yet to her he was but an elderly gentleman, vulgar of appearance and address, and utterly disconnected with the idea of love-making.

A cold dislike passed over her face as he retained her hand. When the door opened suddenly to admit another visitor he dropped it quickly; not, however, before the new-comer had seen his gesture.

As Medea turned and met Sir Bruce Onslow's slow smile, the colour rose to her

face once more. With a little movement of comic dismay the young man said—

"Oh, Mr. McCracken, you here! Why, there is your dutiful little daughter gone home in a hurry to nurse you."

Sir Bruce's host could hardly contain himself as he buttoned up his coat.

"Miss Longstaffe, I must explain my mission at once, or Mr. McCracken will credit me with all sorts of motives," continued Sir Bruce. "I have been to Bedmondstone, and was lucky enough to find in a shop there that valse of Chopin's I spoke to you of last night."

The adroit falsehood did not avail. Medea, turning her gaze on him fully as she leaned against the piano, said distinctly—

"The valse you mentioned to me! You make a mistake. We did not talk about music at all."

He was ready with a rejoinder.

"Oh, how cheaply you value a man's promises! You don't even remember them the next day," he said lightly.

Mr. McCracken had no alternative but to take his departure, though he had no mind to leave this "fiddling beggar" alone in the field.

"Are you coming back with me?" he said stiffly to his guest.

Sir Bruce drew off his gloves slowly.

"No, thank you. I think I'll ask Miss Longstaffe to go through a little music with me preparatory for the concert—just a few familiar passages. I'm woefully out of practice."

The young man's voice expressed more than his words. He seemed bent on tantalizing Mr. McCracken with an intimation of some understanding between himself and the young lady.

Then the man of biscuits went out wrathfully. He would like to know what

the fellow meant by his impudence! He had heard them saying that Sir Bruce had been previously acquainted with this girl in Germany; but that did not justify such an ill-timed visit. He was quite sure Miss Longstaffe gave him no encouragement. He recalled the sudden flushing of Medea's face. Of course it was not from embarrassment; it could only be from annoyance. The *staccato* of Mr. McCracken's heart-throbs was now accented by a nascent jealousy.

Sir Bruce had the reputation of being an accomplished lady-killer; and it was undeniable that he had some skill in winning favour. Had not he himself witnessed young ladies asking to be introduced to him, and flinging themselves at his head in a shameless way on the night of the ball? Those dark eyes and gentle manners appeared irresistible. Certainly, too, he danced and fiddled and wrote smart articles

remarkably well. Yes, he had the pull of him, without doubt, in some ways—youth, to wit.

As Mr. McCracken dwelt on the good looks and talents of the young man, his anxiety did not diminish; it gave a final fillip to his intentions. A suspected rival precipitates a halting mind in such cases. He was no longer between two opinions.

The only thing to be done was to marry Sir Bruce to Rachel. Every man had his price, of course, and his girl was ready enough, like all the rest of them, to accept a handsome and eligible husband. She had her mother's ten thousand pounds, and thirty thousand from himself on her wedding-day would be no shabby figure. He would mention her dower in an off-hand way over the claret to-night. It was preposterous, utterly ridiculous for the baronet to be philandering with a penniless girl. He that had made his pile could afford to

please himself and to give a fancy price for a wife—for to this point Mr. McCracken had come. Of course, many preliminaries had to be gone through, but there was no need to disguise his intention from himself. What a grand figure she had — a head taller than him—and how she looked and walked! He had seen no one in the county to touch her. As to the countess, *she* was very poor shakes beside Miss Longstaffe.

So reflecting, Mr. McCracken made his way home speedily. In the avenue, scudding along with his eyes on the ground, he came unexpectedly face to face with his daughter, outward bound and solitary, save for the company of her pug.

Rachel was suspiciously pensive. Sad thoughts apparently bore her company. But, with no small degree of flippancy in her speech, she lifted up her hands in mock surprise.

"Why, papa; I thought you were nursing your liver over the fire! Where *have* you been? And in your new fur coat, too!" Nothing escaped her.

Mr. McCracken changed colour. He had the appearance of an incensed turkey-cock gobbling out some indefinite rejoinder.

Rachel had set forth with the intention of waylaying Sir Bruce, who had been dropped, for the sake of exercise, as he said, on the homeward way between Bedmondstone and Lakenham. She had not calculated that he would deviate from the direct route to the Hall.

"What have you done with Sir Bruce, —hey?" said Mr. McCracken, recovering himself suddenly, and becoming sternly parental. No doubt of it, Rachel was getting uppish, trying to sit on him too. Ride over his head, that she would, if he let her.

"Oh, he got tired of having his soul

inquired after by Sophia. And Dottie's compliments and attentions really are too barefaced. His modesty decided him to walk home, I suppose. How far have you been? It is strange you did not meet him."

Mr. McCracken sniffed the air like an astute terrier.

"It strikes me, my girl, that *you* ain't making yourself particularly agreeable to the baronet. What do you suppose I asked him here for—hey? Don't you ever say I haven't given you as good chances as any girl need pray for!"

Rachel gave a perceptible little shudder. "Dear me, papa; how very plain-spoken you are to-day! Would it not be as well to veil these little matters, even in our private interviews?"

Mr. McCracken ignored the proposition. Perspicuity, before all things, in this critical situation.

"You've got your chances, as I've said, with money to back you; and you're playing the fool, and letting 'em slip through your fingers. A rich wife would set him on his legs. No need then for that infernal fiddling and scribbling. Damme, girl, wouldn't you like to be 'my lady,' and go to Court!"

Rachel became alarmed at this unprecedented fierceness. The motive for her father's anxiety that she should wed Sir Bruce was not yet clear to her. Mr. McCracken had never unveiled the topic of matrimony with such grim earnestness before.

"But, papa, I can't fling myself at a man's head! Suppose he doesn't want a wife?" she remonstrated.

Mr. McCracken's choler was not to be checked.

"You're deuced shy all at once! Let me tell you I see your game, and between

two stools you'll find yourself on the ground. You've given the baronet a long tether, and now he's making sheep's-eyes at the doctor's girl."

In a moment Rachel saw what was amiss.

"Making love to Miss Longstaffe! What an absurd notion! Really, papa, your fancy is too vigorous. Surely you can see she does not give a thought to any man. Her mind is quite devoted to the arts and sciences. You know she is not an ordinary young lady at all."

But this was poor comfort to the enamoured Mr. McCracken, and, in spite of her well-assumed derision, Rachel felt uncomfortably certain that some recent light had been thrown on Sir Bruce's attentions. Her former suspicions revived with double strength.

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE CONCERT.

"WHAT a love of a cap! and green so becoming to your complexion, Mrs. Parsons," chirped Miss Dormer ecstatically, clasping her small hands in admiration of the new head-dress. Her little curls were not at liberty on this occasion to shake their customary tremulous accompaniment, being enveloped in crisp papers, to insure their good behaviour in the evening.

It was holiday time; but this harmless little sycophant had gone out of her way to call on her patroness, and inform her of the progress of matters in the public school-room. She had also contrived to smuggle

an ornamental programme, blazoned in white and gold, into her pocket, without being detected by Olivia.

"Ay, indeed, Miss Dormer; and so you may well say. But, as every one knows, you are a lady of judgment. Parsons, you know, he popped the question to me in a grass-green gown with yellow sprigs; and if that doesn't convince a body what's becoming, why, I know nought about courtships. It isn't for boasting over them that hasn't been so well-favoured with men's notice that I say it; but, bless you, I had scores better than Parsons ready to fall on their knees if I'd so much as put out my finger. It *is* a very genteel cap, as you say. Miss Prinkerton, she knows as I don't wince at paying a stiff price for a good article on an occasion of this sort. Why, it will last me for Sundays a couple of years!" Mrs. Parsons fingered a certain gilt butterfly which wavered spasmodically on art-

fully concealed wires, between two green rosettes, with an admiring finger, holding back her head and surveying the ornament from every side. "I just asked off-hand, as I was paying for it, if Mrs. Morgan had been into Bedmondstone of late, thinking as her Sunday cap must be getting a bit dashed, and she'd, maybe, bought something for the concert. Miss Prinkerton, who was serving me herself, she smiled a bit, thinking, no doubt, it was pitiful. Now, would you believe it, if that woman, with all them grown-up girls, hasn't been and bought real Honiton and pink ribbons! Only to think of a woman having no better sense than to wear pink at her time of life! She always was too fond of a bit of colour. And only consider the extravagance of it, Miss Dormer!"

This interview between Miss Dormer and her employer but faintly shadowed the agitation created by the forthcoming

concert. Consultations went on in every direction regarding the ladies' attire, when it became known that the Hall people and their "company" would grace the scene. This annual affair in the schoolroom was always an event of moment; but this year it was decreed that an exceptional amount of musical talent should gather together and render it wildly exciting. The *éclat* of the proceedings was a foregone conclusion when Miss Pilkington spread abroad that distinguished amateurs would perform. Rumour was active for a fortnight before, but the crowning grace was lent to the entertainment when "Violin solo—Sir Bruce Onslow," was appended to the programme on the schoolroom door. Miss Prinkerton's establishment, as well as its rival—a repository which was rather looked down upon by the more genteel, as it shared baby-linen with female adornments, were besieged on two consecutive

market-days by ladies from the vicinity of Lakenham. Ornamental collars and frills—*fichus* is, I believe, the more correct term—bows, artificial flowers and feathers, as well as caps, were in great request.

Nothing was said this year of Miss Dormer's qualifications, though, on former occasions, she had always been asked to warble her well-known ditties. Miss Jessie Nichol had good-naturedly entered her name to play "The Blue Bells of Scotland," though it was thought probable bronchitis might intervene. Mr. Brown, of Woolston, ever prompt to respond to the calls of friendship, had promised a guitar accompaniment to his own singing. He had once spent a winter in Seville, and fingered the instrument with faithful affection.

"I make no complaint against Miss Pilkington—none whatever, you perfectly understand, Medea. I know my own merits, and am humble with regard to my attain-

ments. No one will deny that my voice is sweet, though, I admit, not penetrating or of great compass. *I* make no pretence to rival professionals, and I should certainly not have consented to perform before such a distinguished company; but Miss Pilkington—might have had—a little consideration—for my feelings. I am so very susceptible to a little attention—which, as every one knows, I have a right to expect."

Whereby, and with due reference to tearful symptoms, Medea knew that Miss Dormer's sensitive mind was suffering.

There was usually a supper at the rectory to wind up the evening. Invitations were distributed verbally after the concert, but the elect generally knew beforehand who would receive Miss Pilkington's summons. Would the usual party be called to the feast, or would the line this year be drawn a rank higher?

It was hardly likely that the lesser worthies, with whom even Mrs. Morgan and Mrs. Hall scrupled to break bread, would be thrown into close contact with the great folks. Where so much uncertainty prevailed, of course excitement lingered. Under these circumstances it was quite natural that contributions towards the glory of the entertainment should be forthcoming. To be "neighbourly" seemed a necessary virtue.

Cording and bunting in large quantities were contributed as a loan by a veteran nautical worthy of the village, who rejoiced in a flagstaff in front of his small cottage. Captain Doo had been the commander of a small trading vessel, and was terribly addicted to rum-and-water at odd hours. He was frequently seen walking the quarter-deck in front of his habitation in a very unstable condition, and spent much of his time in hauling up and down

his flags, and signalling for his own satisfaction. Rumour asserted that Mary Ann Allnut was not unwilling to undertake his reformation. Being within the pale of the church, he was allowed to minister to needs of the concert.

Mr. Kitto, also, the retired linen draper, who was not received on an equality by the Green, was magnanimous enough to contribute several bunches of his best grapes, and a noble basket of ferns and greenhouse flowers for supper decorations. Mrs. Parsons was ready to tell her friends that she supplied cream in quarts.

"And there's a many that haven't done their duty by the schools and choir, and I hope as their conscience is easy of a night when they lie abed. And me, with so much butter-money out of pocket, and no real lace collar! But there now, the book of judgment will show as I pay more than my tithe, and have every right

to look for a reward in the heavenly mansions."

Little Miss Dormer, having but a small share of this world's goods, could only offer her services in the decorative line; and plenty of enjoyment she got out of her employment. It was a delight to make paper rosettes, and to teach Philomela the uses of glazed calico. The exhilarating society of the young people was, as she said, a tonic which invigorated her system. Indeed, there was much mirth and laughter over a scratch luncheon in the schoolroom. Apollo played all kinds of boyish antics with Letty, no longer so demure with her aunt's eye removed. Olivia was endeavouring at home to make wine go far in jellies, and to extend the capabilities of cream, by whipping it, to the utmost. Poor Edward got a couple of sandwiches to lunch, and went out feeling hardly satisfied. But the com-

pany in the schoolroom received him warmly, and Phil opened her stores of potted meats and cakes at his approach.

"You ought to be a lamplighter, Miss Dormer," said Apollo, commending the agility with which the little old maid ran up and down ladders with tin-tacks and balls of twine.

Medea talked less than the rest, but —perhaps on this account—did more work. The tasks uncongenial to the rest, matters that had no glory in them, fell to her lot. She filled the lamps with oil, put away the untidy litter of school-books, and covered ink-splashed walls with coloured papers. Letty, Apollo, and Philomela, were the chief workers of garlands and decorations.

The last rehearsal had taken place yesterday. The choir-boys had all been well drilled where to stand, a chalk line drawn by Olivia on the platform marking their

toe-point. Mr. Bray, the clerk, with an unmanageable bass voice, had been finally persuaded that violent dramatic action was not required of him in "Hearts of Oak." It was not, however, till Apollo had said solemnly with the conviction of a competent judge, "I assure you the powerful eloquence of your voice is sufficient, Mr. Bray. If you move, it will do away with the thrilling effect." After this he ceased to throw his arms about like a windmill in a hurricane.

When everything was complete, and dainty little Letty put on her fur cap preparatory to departure, with a smiling face, there seemed every prospect of a happy evening before her. Apollo had been very gracious to her, and the recollection of the dinner-party at the Hall, to which she had not been invited, was no longer a grievance. How kind it was of him to have brought her the flowers to

wear to-night! And though camellias did not lend themselves easily to artistic arrangement, or harmonize with her slight figure, Letty was determined to wear them. They were nearly as big as artichokes; but what of that? They were red, and her dress was blue; but it did not matter since he had made choice of them. And she was going to sing a duet with Apollo, and she was quite sure that their voices harmonized admirably. Indeed, Medea had said her voice was like a robin's, and Medea, every one knew, never said what was not true.

She *would* enjoy herself to-night and have her triumph, in spite of *that* Miss McCracken, horrid, sly, flirting girl that she was! It was all very well for Medea to deny it, and to say she could see nothing forward in her behaviour. Medea was always stupid and blind in that way.

Philomela was, of course, wildly excited.

She flew hither and thither about the house, fulfilling her daily duties in haste. Her needle stuck idly in her work for once, and her restlessness was apparent to all. She went upstairs and spread out her dress betimes, tried on her gloves, and surveyed her own image in the looking-glass with palpable dissatisfaction.

Philomela had a vast contempt for her own healthy complexion and plump proportions. Medea was so nice and tall, and had such dark, smooth hair, and no objectionable colour in her cheeks. And as to Flossie, every one called her lovely with her pink-and-white skin and dainty figure.

Philomela had always contemplated the annual concert with pleasure; but this year it was to be something extraordinary. Excitements of the mildest were rare in Lakenham, and her appetite for amusement was great. To-night it would all be better than it had ever been before, she

said to herself. Would she not see Medea play in public? And her clever sister, her beautiful sister—for she was sure Medea was also beautiful, though mamma said not—would be made much of and applauded. Perhaps even her name might be in the *Bedmondstone Press* next week. Mr. Brown of Woolston always had a long account of *his* concert in the paper, and Lakenham performers were all much superior, she was sure. To-night she was going to braid Medea's hair, for Medea never took any trouble to make herself look smart. She wished she would come upstairs now and see about her clothes, instead of bothering with those stupid books of A's and B's and C's, and funny little dots and crosses and dashes, and X, Y, Z's. Algebraic signs were a strange mystery to Philomela. Should she friz some little curls above Medea's broad forehead? No, she thought not. When

Medea looked upwards as she was playing, she was so like that old saint's picture in mamma's bedroom, the picture poor papa had bought in Italy; for Nicholas had had a passing craze for things mediæval. Philomela thought the saint might not look in character with cunning little locks artfully gone astray. So thinking, she went back to her mother's room and mused, gazing at the saint, till Medea came in search of her and found her thus idle.

The poor doctor had pleaded hard to be let off attending the concert this year, as Mrs. Morgan had such a strong escort of young people. But Charlotte was inexorable on the score of duty. The truth was, she had no mind to face Miss Godbold again without her natural protector. And Medea had said that Miss Pilkington had forwarded a programme to Ellesmore Lodge, and not a doubt remained that

Aunt Dorothea would put in an appearance.

"You will please to remember, John, that this is not a matter of pleasure only. We owe it to Church and State to help to maintain a decent choir. *You* may forget that I was the widow of a clergyman before I married you, but I do not."

Without doubt Mrs. Morgan had been very much spoilt in her mature years. At this moment she was incensed by another matter, and indirectly visited her resentment on the doctor before challenging the offender personally. It was doubtless an ingenious way of getting up steam.

"Medea, do you intend to disgrace your family publicly in that old black dress?" she said at last, turning with a look of severe disdain on her daughter, who had come down to tea in her ordinary Sunday gown, a black cashmere high to the neck, with only a little frill of lace at the throat

and wrists. "Upon my word, you look like a Sister of Mercy!"

In vain had Philomela crowned her saint with elaborate plaits. They had not availed to give Medea a festive appearance.

"But, mother, I should look so dressed up in the white gown I wore at the ball. I have no other. I thought it would not be in good taste to go like that, with a bare neck, in a village schoolroom. Do people do it in England now?"

Charlotte smoothed down her own rich silk with pharisaical satisfaction. The unrighteous pink ribbons, whereof Mrs. Parsons had made mention, fluttered in an agitated way.

"Well, to be sure! Do you hear her, John? A pretty state of things it is when a daughter tells her mother what is in good taste! You know best, Medea, of course—you always do. I am only a poor, stupid old woman, who has lived in one

place all her life, and knows nothing of the ways of society. But, say what you like, you are a nice dowdy-looking creature for Aunt Godbold to make fun of. There isn't much escapes her notice, I can tell you. I'd make a good appearance before her if I was to die for it."

Here the doctor interposed.

"Your Aunt Dorothea will only think Medea is a sensible young woman, too wise to court a rheumatic fever by sitting bare-backed in a place as draughty as a barn. Now, child, run upstairs and hunt up some ribbons or smart fal-lals to brighten you up a bit and please your mother."

Medea rose instantly, lighting a candle and murmuring something indistinct about geraniums from the green-house.

"Take the eucharis lilies," called out the doctor. Now, these were his pet flowers, and carefully cherished by him. Apollo had looked with longing at their delicate

blossoms, not daring to cut them for Letty.

When Medea came back with the flowers no one noticed tears upon them. They were very like dewdrops.

The doctor had appealed to his wife this evening in vain. Before coming downstairs he had said, with angry remonstrance—

"What has the girl done that you should treat her in such an unmotherly way?"

"Done? Why, she has never ceased doing things to annoy me since you sent her to Madame Freudenthal's. She has never been like my child since. *You* call Medea truthful, but I tell you she is the most reserved person about her own doings that I ever met. She never opens her heart to me like the rest. It is nothing but secrets and concealments with her from morning till night," answered Charlotte.

"Have you ever invited her confidence

by any show of affection, I wonder?" said the doctor dryly.

"Invited her confidence? And pray do you expect me to go down on my knees to my own child, and ask her not to look down on her mother for being an ignorant woman? Of course, there's a lover at the bottom of things now. Any one can see that she's a changed creature since the last time she came home. But there, now, I've done with her. Let her go her own way —back to her professors and musicians. It's likely enough she's in love with some wretched man who lives on tobacco and absurd notions."

Meanwhile, Medea was sore at heart and much perplexed in spirit. Sir Bruce's attitude towards her was still embarrassing, though he had ventured on no tender reminiscences since the evening of the ball. Yet she felt he did not intend to let matters remain as they were, that he

would make some fresh endeavour to bridge over the past. He had dared to visit her in her home on a frivolous pretext the previous day, and had remained for some minutes after Mr. McCracken's departure, discussing music in an airy way, and touching lightly on events at Hornhausen. How could she forbid him the house without making it evident to others that something more than friendship had existed between them? To declare that she would not receive a former acquaintance, would at once intimate that there had been peculiar relations between them.

And why did Sir Bruce continue to persecute her thus? He had so clearly explained to her at one momentous interview that his attentions meant nothing. He had said, on that day of her enlightenment last year, that marriage, or a marriage of love, was not for him. He had talked prettily of platonics — platonics

flavoured with sentiment, of course. But Medea, being pure-minded, cast from her all such unworthy love-making.

Long before the Lakenham Hall party appeared upon the scene of the concert, Lady Wrexham sailed into the schoolroom. To use the expression of Captain Doo, whose flags covered a multitude of sins on the walls, her "royals were full of wind." This nautical gentleman had secured a reserved seat next to Mary Ann Allnut, who was resplendent in a purple silk. On this occasion he was sober in his demeanour, only giving vent to *sotto voce* ejaculations as well-known characters entered. There was certainly no fault to find with the dignified bearing of the countess. A sort of "knock me down" defiance was evident in her entry.

Tom had been twice to Lakenham Hall since the ball. So much her ladyship had gathered from Dick. For this young man

had been invited to lunch at Ellesmore Lodge, and from him had been extracted every detail of Tom's doings. No doubt of it, the little enchantress had the young man in her toils. Lady Wrexham was driven to her wits' ends to know how to defeat this wily little Circe. It was too soon for open interference, but yet things might go too far without her perceiving. She had come to-night to see how matters stood.

Miss Godbold, as stiff as whalebone and brocade could make her, followed after her with measured tread, the tap of her walking-stick making an audible noise on the bare boards. She was by no means lame or infirm, but custom had made the gold-headed prop a necessary adjunct to her state. A huge sable cape, which she did not remove during the performance, adorned her shoulders. The doctor, who sat immediately behind her, looked towards

Charlotte when he heard the old lady audibly anathematize the draughts. Miss Dorothea was not always choice in her language.

A thrilling whisper passed from seat to seat, and the fluttering of fans diminished to a *piano* movement as the august lady of the district made her entry.

Mr. McCracken's party did not meet with nearly as much respectful homage when, at half-past eight, Rachel and Miss Wilson headed the procession. There was a good deal of noise and commotion in the little doorway beforehand. Her ladyship kept her face steadily turned to the platform.

"We ain't kept you waiting, I hope, Pilkington?" said Mr. McCracken, rampant of mood. "Rachel wanted to make us dine at half-past six, but I wouldn't stand that. Thank you—the *first* row, one to six, left-hand side. I don't like looking

over other people's heads. If I can't get best places I don't go."

This speech was quite audible to the assembly, but Mr. Pilkington, good man, meekly endured the patronage. Any latent sparks of self-assertion had been quenched by Olivia long ago.

Lady Wrexham had thought it probable that Tom would attach himself to this party; and Laura was conscious that beneath irritation her temper was not under control. So she looked the other way at the first echo of Mr. McCracken's voice. It was not, however, necessary to nerve herself for an aggravating sight, for Dick had ridden home in haste to tell Tom that Laura was going to the concert. Whereupon Tom swore considerably, but did not go. He had a vivid recollection of sundry passages of speech with his sister, wherein undue use had been made of Leonora's name. The countess was apt

to insist unpleasantly on Tom's weak side.

None of the performers were yet to be seen when Mr. McCracken arrived. They were all assembled in a little room to the rear of the platform, whence proceeded the sound of many voices and much hilarity. Rachel's quick ears caught Letty's pretty peals of laughter. Mr. Brown peered through the curtained archway several times in a surreptitious manner, twanging his guitar as a premonitory signal. Then Olivia gleamed through the white muslin curtains, a dazzling vision with steel snakes coiling about her throat and arms, and an avalanche of steel stars pouring downwards to her waist, where they disappeared beneath a metal zone—a cestus whose limited inches were anything but classic. Venus would have shamed to wear so small a girdle. Olivia had once more abjured the matronly style of dress

befitting her years. It had not availed to move Mr. McCracken's admiration, so she returned to her former weapons and showy decorations.

Presently a bell rang, and it was at once seen that this was a signal to announce the performance. Half a dozen of the choir-boys, with shining faces and red hands, filed in. There was some kicking and shoving as each essayed to reach the chalk line, and not to overpass it. A glee was first on the programme, and was accomplished successfully, Medea accompanying the singers. She was grave and preoccupied apparently, for her eyes never rested on the audience, though Philomela made frantic signals to attract her attention. She left the platform with the boys, and Letty and Apollo came in together.

Miss Letitia looked very demure and prim, with two red camellias stuck in her belt. The obstinate things would not sit

close. Their heads had come off in an attempt to persuade them to nestle in a frill. Now there were hair-pins stuck through their stiff petals.

Miss McCracken's pulses quickened as Letty sat down at the piano, and Apollo leaned over her to whisper some remark. Apollo's commonplaces always had the appearance of love-making. It was only an injunction not to hurry the time; but as he smiled down at her it looked to the spectators like some tender speech.

Mrs. Hall, seated immediately behind Rachel, remarked audibly, "A pretty pair of singers. What a pity the girl is one of seven!"

At this information Rachel's heart soothed itself to rest. The applause of hob-nailed boots was great when the duet ceased. The gallery demanded an *encore*. Miss Dorothea, with both hands resting on her stick, nodded her head repeatedly.

"He's as like his grandfather as two peas," she said half aloud, recalling the bright brother of her youth, Charlotte's father, who had gone sadly astray in after years.

The next performer was slow to appear. At last Mr. Pilkington was sent to summons the unwilling player. Apparently Sir Bruce had forgotten his part in the entertainment, for he sat staring at the ceiling, only now and again directing some trifling remark to Rachel. When addressed by Mr. Pilkington, he took his violin leisurely out of the case at his feet and ascended the steps to the platform. He played with his customary skill, though without apparent enthusiasm. Yet it was after a fashion that the Lakenham rustics hardly recognized as belonging to an instrument it called a fiddle.

"Our musicianers can't touch *him*," said Captain Doo *sotto voce*. "There's Seth

Little, as plays at our weddings and fairs —his fiddle don't go up and down like this feller's. Maybe it's the price he give for it."

The audience was too respectful to demand an *encore* from this white-handed gentleman who condescended to amuse them. Moreover, he looked so unutterably bored by his own performance that it would have been cruelty to insist on a prolongation of his misery.

Mrs. Jagger was moved to pity, for she was of a sentimental vein at times, having fed in her youth on Byronic romances. She admired dark eyes and classic features.

"Some of they aristocrats looks so downright tired of living, a'most as though life was made up of indigestion and no sleep of a night," she remarked to her next neighbour.

The cottage piano, which had seen the best of its life in Olivia's service, when she

had been wont to practise her brilliant fireworks, could not, of course, compare with Mr. McCracken's costly Erard ; but Medea was familiar with its constitutional weaknesses, and forbore to press too hardly upon them. Fine instrumental performers are like nobly-tuned natures, for each succeeds in drawing from contemptible mechanisms or weak humanities the best sounds and expression they are severally capable of.

As Medea's turn came to play, the yellow keys thrilled responsively to her masterly hands. She compelled them to do their utmost. But it was not in her heart to play any *scherzo* to-night. She commenced a sonata with an *adagio* movement. By-and-by the complaint of C sharp minor wailed beneath her touch. It was thrilling, heartrending. A breathless silence prevailed in the room. Then came an *allegretto*, Medea's enthusiasm rising with it. She heard, saw, felt nothing but the music

of an inspired composer. Her breath came quickly, and the eucharis lilies rose and fell beneath her palpitating heart. The tears had dried upon them. In this emotional mood Medea played superbly, astonishing even those who knew her powers. None of the audience had ever listened to music such as this.

"She is making herself ridiculous," whispered Charlotte, stirring uneasily as she glanced at the surrounding faces. She wished that it would cease.

"No, my wife, I think not. This is what is called genius," the doctor answered in a very quiet way.

When the sonata came to an end, Medea rose abruptly. Sir Bruce got up and followed her slowly. He had remained on the stage during her performance.

"May I come in?" he said, at the door of the ante-room. "I also am one of the profession, Miss Pilkington."

Mr. McCracken scowled at this move, whispering to his daughter—

"You see what he's after now, Rachel!"

It was very convenient to this gentleman to be able to ascribe his close observation of Sir Bruce's behaviour to a parental interest on his daughter's behalf.

CHAPTER V.

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS.

Medea was one of the last to leave the school-house; one demand after another detained her. There had been a prompt stampede of all invited guests to the rectory, but Medea had contrived to slip out of this current, intending to return home at once.

Having seen the lamps extinguished and Miss Pilkington's piano covered up in a baize garment—this being a susceptible instrument to cold, as befitted its years—Medea begged the clerk to lock the doors and prepared herself for departure. She had spent ten minutes in heaping together

a miscellaneous collection of relics—a pair of goloshes, a lace handkerchief, a fan, and the usual floral fragments of a social gathering. Finally, having rolled up Apollo's forgotten songs, she wrapped herself in a large Paisley shawl—an inheritance of Mrs. Morgan's youth, now employed as a useful family wrap.

The moon was hidden behind fleecy clouds when the girl came out into the porch of the schoolroom; yet it was not too dark for her to see the form of a man waiting there—a man who leaned against the stone-work without any evidence of impatience.

"How kind of you to wait for me, Apollo!" said the ever-credulous Medea in her warm, full tones of pleasure.

Painful experience of forgetfulness had not broken her of the habit of looking for signs of fraternal affection. But as the tall figure moved, a hat was lifted

courteously. Not after this fashion are brotherly greetings. The girl drew back with a sudden movement signifying dismay.

"Will you allow me to be your brother's substitute and take you to the rectory?" said Sir Bruce in a low voice.

The clerk, with an assistant choir-boy, were still to be heard moving about in the deserted schoolroom. Medea recovered herself quickly.

"I am not going to the rectory, and I need no escort," she said quietly.

"Then you are going home. Will you not take my arm?" he said, as she moved down the little path.

"Thank you, no. We shall not go the same way," she said with brief decision.

"Your way shall be my way," he answered with more determination than before. When out of earshot of the school-

house he spoke more emphatically. "You give me no opportunity of meeting you or of exchanging a word. I waited to-night for the chance of seeing you. Why do you avoid me in this persistent manner?"

Medea, turning her head quickly, looked steadily at her companion, slackening her pace a little.

"It is for me to ask why you seek me." Then, more passionately, she said, turning her face from him, "Why cannot you leave me to myself?"

He ceased to drawl in his customary way. "Because I want to be friends with you. We must be on good terms once more."

"Friends?" she repeated. "Ah, you know that can never be!"

Her voice was full of quiet conviction. They had come to the little gate which led out of the school precincts into the road-

way. The moon had emerged from the clouds once more, and now illuminated the gables of the rectory above the belt of dark trees. No one was to be seen moving about. The winter landscape was quite still and silent. At this spot there was an old yew tree, and as the young man placed his back against the little gate, his face was partly under the shadow of the heavy dark branches spreading above.

Medea stood outside the darkness, erect in the full moonlight. She did not ask Sir Bruce to let her pass, or make the faintest sign of anger or impatience. There was no evidence on her face of any struggle with feeling, or of any embarrassment as he looked fixedly at her. In vain he sought to read any sign of yielding.

"You are heartless," he said with some bitterness. "You are as cold as ice."

She made no reply.

"I am going away to-morrow," he went on.

"Yes, so I heard them saying."

She drew a long breath as though of relief. Her quietness and composure maddened him with the desire to take her in his arms and wring from her some confession of feeling, of love, if it might be, though even his vanity scarcely left him that hope.

"I may never see you again," he almost pleaded in his most seductive voice.

"I think you will not see me again. If you return I shall not be here."

He moved suddenly, and the gate creaked.

"Oh, you are going abroad again? When, and where?"

She cast a quick glance towards him.

"What is that to me, you mean," he said fiercely. "It is everything to me, I tell

you, Medea!" There was an angry light in his eyes.

A chill air stirred the yew branches. Medea gave a slight shiver. Sir Bruce moved nearer to her. Perhaps he felt she was escaping from him—had escaped. Yes, it was true, as she had said, that there was something different in her to other women, something he had not calculated upon. He had lost what he could never win again. His subtle fascinations no longer touched her heart. She was invulnerable, it seemed to him, in some proof panoply—either a new love or utter disdain.

"You are changed, indeed. You were not always so cold. You never could have loved me!"

He spoke vehemently in an unreasoning way. Yet he leaned towards her, almost as if expecting some tender denial. She was silent, looking on the ground. Her

muteness, her stillness, seemed to feed his passion.

He laid one hand softly upon her. She drew back from his touch, with a gesture too dignified to be called repugnance. He had never before pleaded in vain for a woman's love. He was beside himself with anger and wounded pride.

In a moment he resolved to offer her love with something tangible. He would even make her his wife. At any price, now she was so nearly escaping from him, she should be his. He had never failed in accomplishing a conquest he had set his heart on. His voice was unsteady and broken with passion, but still the tones were musical and persuasive. Words of love always came easily to his lips.

"I cannot live without you now, Medea. My love—my life—let us talk no more of sacrifice! Medea, will you marry me?"

She turned her face slowly away from him as the last words fell on her ear. It almost seemed to her that she needed to spare him something that must speak in her looks. But he made a step forward, as if to draw her into the shadow where he stood. As he advanced she turned her face towards him.

His outstretched hands dropped suddenly, and he drew back once more, the faint expectant smile of triumph fading from his lips. Her eyes did not flinch, but rested upon him. There was no deep joy, no glow of rapture in them. There was nothing there he expected to see. There was great wonderment, almost pity too, but, mingling with it, something as near akin to contempt as Medea knew. This sweet proud creature seemed to say, "What manner of man are you?" Not after this wise would any bashful surrender of maidenly dignity be made;

not so would any agitated tale of much-enduring love be breathed forth.

At this moment Sir Bruce recalled the ardent-spirited girl who had hung fondly on his words, who had thrilled at his touch, drooping her lovely, bashful eyes before his earnest gaze. Then she was a beautiful, quivering creature, who had murmured, with heaving breast and slow tears falling, her broken words of love. The clear revelation of her spotless soul, her single-heartedness, had almost angered him then. His fastidious taste had cavilled at her too transparent feelings, at the pure depth of her affection. Her faith in him had exacted such a nice behaviour, such a righteous mode of living and thinking. He had said to himself then, that daily contact with such strong and noble affections would become wearisome ; he did not want an angel for a daily companion.

Sir Bruce could reason admirably about

his loves when not under the spell of the loved one's presence. He was as much philosopher as poet, and, philandering grown wearisome, became analytical and fastidious. His love for Medea, once the novelty of conquest worn off, he resolved into parts of folly and imprudence, and had subsequently hastened his departure from the little town of Hornhausen. He had left without warning, snapping the cords of love rudely asunder. At intervals he had been surprised to be haunted by the girl's image. The impressions of the fair women he had known, so many without discretion, did not usually linger long in his mind. He had gone back to Hornhausen after some months, but she had left the place, and in her absence something of the old charm of the sleepy little Stadt had gone. Fate had, however, favoured him, and unlooked-for circumstances had thrown him in Medea's way once more. But it was Medea

transformed. He was in love, verily, with a different type of character, with, to all intents, another woman—a woman wronged. This cold and dignified creature, one who drew him chiefly by repelling his addresses, had a stronger mastery over his nature than she who had trembled at his approach. Only six months ago he had struck the strings of her heart with a careless hand, and love had gushed therefrom; but now no melody would flow beneath his touch.

Medea herself knew that her pulses would never throb again at any words that he could utter. At the first renewal of intercourse she had distrusted herself, fearing that love might rise again if he summoned it from its grave.

She had said at their first interview that she was afraid—afraid of herself. But now she was serene in the confidence of her own strength. The storm of love had

passed over her, searing her first affection. She had loved unworthily, and there was no germ of endurance in that love. In no way was it immortal. Now it was faded and become corrupt, a thing she hated to look at or remember, and Medea knew that never at any future time would flowers of tender recollection grow above the grave she had made for it.

Sir Bruce's sudden, unexpected avowal, with the proposal to make her his wife, only deepened her conviction of his unworthiness. In a moment she understood that there had been no real obstacle before to any honourable proposal—only his great selfishness.

She was too unworldly to cast a thought at this moment to any triumph to be won over those in Hornhausen who had compassionated what they called her disappointment. Had not they seen the handsome Lothario at her feet for weeks

together, envying her the power to detain him so long? And had they not smiled with contemptuous pity when he had gone away so suddenly?

"Do not look at me in that way, Medea. Will you never forgive me for a want of understanding? How could I know how well I loved you till we parted? And day and night the thought of your coldness since I came here maddens me. You beautiful sorceress, there are none like you—no, none."

Medea shivered. The sheets of music in her hand fluttered.

"Ah yes," she said with quiet emphasis. "And, like another Jason, you would, without thinking of any future, swear an eternal fidelity." Her voice changed almost to bitterness. "But you forget it is not worth your while in my case. I have no Golden Fleece within my power, nothing at all to give you except myself. In days

gone by that offering was not worth any sacrifice. In what way has it changed now? Must I, indeed, put you in mind of your duty to your family, recall your rank and all the other considerations which once weighed so heavily upon you? Where is your worldly wisdom? Are your prudence and ambition dead? Do you forget that I am poor, that I have been a companion, that my stepfather is only a parish doctor? It is time for me to recall to your mind your literary distinction, your social position—matters you once insisted strongly upon. You said last summer that marriage for you meant extinction. Does it mean less than that now? Are you content to let your light be quenched so early?"

Any passers by, if there had been such, might have heard every word of Medea's speech, so clear and unhesitating was her voice.

"I was a blind fool when I said those things. Forget them, Medea, and bury them with the past. Life will be nothing to me henceforth without you. I cannot think or work or act, since we have met again. Your image comes between me and my future. We have every taste and feeling in common. Our union would be the highest strength. How could I know that I should meet you here? You never told me where your home was. But fate is stronger than our wills. Destiny has thrown us together once more, and I know now that I cannot go away from this place with any hope of happiness if you do not give me back your love or the hope of winning it."

Medea sighed heavily. For a moment she lifted one hand to her eyes, passing it slowly over them, as if to clear away some obstruction to clear sight.

"Ah, do I dream? Is this a jest, Sir

Bruce? Indeed, I think you are very cruel to me. It is time for me to go home. I have listened to you long enough. Let me pass. Our ways do not lie together."

Her shawl fell away from her as she moved. The moon still shone on her face. When the wrap was removed the man could see how quickly her breath came. The drooping eucharis lilies made a patch of white upon her breast.

"My God!" he said in fierce anger; "how can I make you believe me? This is no jest, no mockery. I ask you to be my wife. I beseech you to give me back your love. Was it so poor a thing that it could suffer no doubt, no days of adversity? I swear our ways shall *not* part! You are mine. You were never any other man's; you never shall be! You are not a woman to toss your heart from one keeping to another. Medea, come to me, darling! Throw aside this foolish

pride and resentment. Believe only that it has all been a mistake—a foolish mistake. Oh, love, let us play our beautiful air *da capo!* You are not happy now, as you once were, when your heart was mine."

His face was on a level with hers. It was so near that he could see her eyes were full of unshed tears. This evidence of feeling renewed his confidence in himself. His dark southern face bent to hers, full of eager passion. The thrilling notes of his rich voice vibrated tenderly. He would have touched her lips; but she put him away quickly, with one hand outstretched.

"Do not come near to me. The old melody you talk of is not music to my ears now. We can never play it together again. The strings that you used to touch are broken. It is very sad; but it is quite true." After a little pause, she said, "Believe me, our roads part here."

He was maddened by her resistance.

The impulsive girl he had known formerly, whose very heart-throbs he had counted, had hardened into an insensible woman. She stood like a goddess in the moonlight, calm and placid, insensible to his pleading.

"How am I to humble myself to you? What more do you ask of me?" he said vehemently. No woman had ever so resolutely opposed his advances.

She looked at him with a far-off, pathetic look in her eyes—a world of pity, too. It was as though she saw something spectral, or listened for something inaudible to his ears.

"When I look at you now, it feels as though I were looking at some one who had died long ago—at some one who had come back—but, oh, how different! Surely all—all who die will not grow out of our love like this. It is terrible to feel it. Your voice, when you speak of love—I know it is the same voice that used to say the

same things. It is not strange to me, in reality—it is just what it always was. Only, now it is as though I had been to some new school, and I know that there are false notes in it. It is like the tunes I played when I was a little child. I know now that they were imperfect." She sighed before resuming. "See, even when you touch me—lay your hand on mine —it does not tremble in the least, does it? That is strange, I think. But there is nothing in me that ever could answer to you any more. I could not marry you—oh, no, no! —because I do not love you any longer. I thank God now that you did not ask me to before. I should have ceased to love you as your wife. Could anything be more terrible than that? You say that I do not look happy as I once did. Ah, yes, that is true; but——"

He broke in hotly, "Medea, give me the right to make you happy again."

"You could not do it now," she said gently, almost tenderly, as if in pity. "But happiness is not everything in life," she went on. "To be free from care, to be loved, to be flattered, is not enough for me. I think you do not understand my thoughts or ways. They seem, perhaps, foolish to you—they do to many people. It is well we did not come nearer to each other in life. Do not interrupt me. This is the last time I shall speak to you." She lifted her hand with a sort of faint appeal; the slow tears fell down her cheek. "You love to talk about what is great and true, Sir Bruce; you have the command of fine language to exalt what is worthy. You worship the noblest writers and musicians. Yes, indeed, these things deceived me. I did not guess how easy it is to take the name of beauty and holiness in vain, to worship at an altar you do not believe in. But there are some who

worship true gods, and yet whose souls are full of falsity. Oh, it has troubled me deeply to realize that men and women can pitch their words so high above their deeds! I know now that you can bend yourself before what is high, but are not led to be great and true yourself."

Medea spoke with the most exalted enthusiasm, her lovely eyes fixed on space beyond her companion. From any other lips less earnest and pure such speech would have provoked ridicule. She spoke again, halting slightly as she went on.

"Before we part there is one other thing I must say to you—ask you." With her decision growing less, she continued, "If—if in the future you hope to be happy, perhaps with some good, true-hearted woman as as your wife, do not embitter your memory with any further 'trifling' now. Spare any innocent girl who may take your fancy for a day, or help to while away some tedious

hours, your flatteries, your kindness, your soft looks. Ah, do not say more than you feel or mean! Do not deceive yourself or her by words of love, if you mean nothing —more. It is taking in vain the holiest thing God has given us. I pray you, be more merciful to others than you were to me. I do not say or think that to all it would come as it did to me. God forbid that any other should feel as I have felt! There are some people who forget their pain and grief so easily, and life seems to leave no marks upon them. But I—I was never like that. When I first met you I knew nothing of love—not even from books, for I never read romance. I thought that love must mean so much, and I thought that I was to be blessed amongst women. All the reverence, fealty, chivalry that belongs to highest love, I believed had fallen to my share. How could I know that the love of men, such as

you—a man of the world, you called yourself—is but a shuttlecock played with for pastime in idle hours? Ah, you were cruel to me—who was—so ignorant—so defenceless—so believing! It is over now. This is our farewell. We shall not meet again here—it may be never again in all our lives."

As she stretched forward, making an attempt to lift the latch, he took possession of her hand, cold as ice, and as unresponsive. He wound his right arm about her waist with a force she could not resist. But she swayed backwards, keeping his face away from hers by the compelling power of her eyes. Anguished eyes they were. Their sad, inexorable gaze seemed to say that all was ended; that here, indeed, the spirit of love was dead. There was to be no surrender. How could any man caress this chill image? The severe gravity of her passionless look checked the tide of the man's fierce love.

"Do not leave me like this. Oh, love, give me back your faith! This cannot be the end!"

His voice vibrated hoarsely. Medea did not struggle in his clasp, only keeping her head thrown back as she looked steadily at him. His appeal left her still cold and unmoved.

"Wouldst thou have a serpent sting thee twice?" she said, smiling ever so faintly.

Suddenly he let her go. "Say you do not love me, Medea, and there will be an end of this!"

He doubted, even now, if her lips would utter those words. He watched her curiously, as if expecting to see a struggle. As he stood waiting for her reply, he unlatched the gate, yet retaining his hold of it.

She did not pause long, and, in a clear voice and with the same unflinching eyes, gave her answer—

"I do not love you any longer, Sir Bruce."

The great truth of her soul shone in her steadfast looks at that moment. Impossible to doubt her words. Then the man turned quickly away, knowing he had lost her.

END OF VOL. II.

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